ORGANIC PANENTHEISM IN A NORTHEAST ASIAN VIEW: A HOLISTIC AND BALANCED UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHRISTIAN GOD THROUGH NORTHEAST ASIAN AND WESTERN LENSES

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by
Dongwoo Lee
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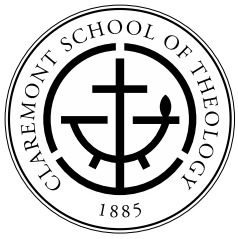

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Abstract

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Religious traditions are deeply linked to the philosophies and methodologies that provide them with their basic frameworks. In this comparative work, I review the Western theological concept of panentheism as it is found in Northeast Asian traditions, with a focus on the Korean context. I reevaluate the understanding of God in the Western view, which is mostly addressed by mainline Christian theologians in the West, in a new way. Process thought offers an insightful methodology for framing the concept of God in the East and the West to build a more wholistic understanding of the nature of God. This research will be helpful not only to Korean Christians, who will benefit from being able to reconceptualize the notion of the Christian God in a panentheistic way that is already present in their cultural framework, but also for Christians in many other cultural contexts. The concept of the organic panentheistic God in the perspective of northeast Asia contributes to a more balanced, holistic, and multicultural (making sense in various cultures) image of God.

Panentheism has only been understood relatively recently in the Western world. But the concept of panentheism is not totally new to Eastern religious traditions and philosophies. Due to its limited exposure in the Western academic world, the concept of

panentheism has not been thoroughly considered in the Western philosophical sphere, even though the panentheistic understanding of God is broadly found in Eastern religions and philosophies. In this dissertation, I explore the concept of panentheism in five major categories identified by John W. Cooper that have been used in Western academia and suggest approaches for analyzing Eastern religions and philosophies from a panentheistic perspective. Lastly, I propose a conceptual bridge that can yield a constructive understanding of panentheism with a more balanced viewpoint that is rooted in particular contexts and overarches the limited understanding of this concept in both the East and the West. I mainly focus on the Korean context in my analysis of encultured Eastern religious traditions and philosophies. I hope that the more balanced and wholistic view I suggest, which I call organic panentheism, will be beneficial not only to Korean Christians who have been struggling to understand God with Western methodology in a context that lacks certain elements of Western methodology but also to all people who want to see God in a balanced and wholistic lens that combines elements of both Eastern and the Western theology.

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Introduction

Metaphysics in theology can change our understanding of God and God's relationship with the world. Our understanding of God in our metaphysical system defines our worldview, how we as people of faith understand and act in the world, how we comprehend the salvation of the creation, and how we make these understandings relevant. Our understanding of God gives us certain perspectives on relations between God and the world. These, in turn, transform our ways of thinking, acting, and reacting in the world in both positive and negative ways.

No theology takes place in a vacuum. If we try to analyze a theology or a social theory while being detached from the context that it originated from, then we have to contend with the large errors that every trial will immediately yield due to our non-contextual/non-relational methodological approach. The theory will lose its relevance to its context. If a metaphysical theory arises from the concreteness of reality but then is pursued only through an abstract path, it will result in a critical error in the theory since the theory has lost its foundation in and connection to reality; it then becomes necessary to go back to the context to in order to prove the integrity of the theory. Alfred North Whitehead calls this the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness."[1] Therefore, as with any

[1] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected ed., ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 93.

theory, theology should remain rooted in reality. Reality gives a theology life and integrity so it can survive in the long term.

In the area of theology, the tension between the transcendence of a God who is separate from the finite world and human experience and the immanence of God in the world has been addressed by many theologians in various eras. This suggests that theological propositions have innate paradoxical characteristics and that it is hard to reconcile the two opposites. Paul Tillich's method of correlation suggests a way to find a middle way in dealing with the mutually exclusive or paradoxical question and answer. He explained a method of correlation as follows in his book, Systematic Theology Vol.2. "'Correlation,' a word with several meanings in scientific language, is understood as 'interdependence of two independent factors.'".[2] He saw that theological answers are mutually independent with the questions and vice versa. A way of correlation prevents one to the middle way has tried to embrace the paradoxical elements in both perspectives and achieve harmony. Harmony, however, does not mean syncretizing the differences. Reaching harmony suggests a new way of understanding theological factors. It means discovering a new metaphysics that can possibly explain the paradox in a new way. Metaphysics should reflect the reality in ways that are relevant and at the same time should interpret reality correctly. In this sense, the integrity of a theological metaphysics is very important and is necessary if a theological metaphysics is to be considered sound. Therefore, a good theological metaphysics should explain abstract concepts that refer to the mystical and transcendent aspects of God using terms reflecting concrete reality. In this perspective, all theology should begin with reality and then move to the abstract by

[2] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 2:13.

exploring the supra-reality realm, returning to reality to explain and to prove itself. In this sense, every theology is a contextual theology.

However, in the field of comparative theology and philosophy the majority of studies have been done in the setting of Western theology and philosophy and mainly by white Western scholars. Given that all religions reflect the contexts of their practitioners in many ways, the Western approaches have to date been missing the very important element of comparative work. I hope this project will enhance the diversity of perspectives in the field of comparative studies by analyzing Asian religious traditions and philosophies (mainly those of Northeast Asia) through the lens of Asian contexts (mainly Northeast Asian) and by developing an alternative theistic view that is more holistic than current Western perspectives. I call this perspective *organic panentheism*. It is located in between the East and the West. In brief, organic panentheism proposes an image of God as not static and never changing but as always changing; not a concept of God derived from the old Greek idea of seeing the relation between God and the world as dualistic but as not only transcendent but also immanent and omnipresent; not a God who is removed from the world and people but who is personal and relational and explicit; not a pantheistic but a panentheistic God; and not a classical concept but a postmodern understanding. This is the new image of God that I present in this project.

I have humbly attempted to understand God with my own intellectual ability and empirical experience and have been researching many thoughts and theories in various religions and philosophies. There are many views of how to understand God. Theologians each have their own ways of thinking of God. Hypothetically, if we bring ten theologians together in a room, then we are going to hear about ten different Gods.

Among the many theories and various understanding of the concept of God, I have found it very helpful that the concept of God in process thought suggests. In process thought, the seeds of potentialities come from God. Theologies that grow from these seeds become lenses with which to understand the world and God and their relationship with one another. Theologies affect our thinking system and the formation of our understanding of others. Liberation-related theologies such as liberation, feminist, black, and Minjung theologies focus more on the contextual location (the place where theology is conducted). The location implies the context where people interpret God's will and apply their interpretations to their contexts. Christian hermeneutics are important in order to define our understanding of God, the world, and their relation to each other. We can propose several "what if" questions with hermeneutics in our theological interpretations. What if our understanding of God itself has changed? In other words, if we apply different hermeneutics to our understanding of God, then we will reach a very different theological landscape from where we are now.

The understanding of God in classical theology is based on ancient Greek philosophy, which saw God as a nonrelational, perfect, unchangeable, static being. This view has influenced our understanding of God in Christianity for many centuries. The world and God are separate. God has been depicted by many Christian theologians as an all-powerful, all-knowing, impassive, and independent God who is not influenced by the world. However, some theologies have a different understanding of God. These theologians think that God is changeable, relational, sympathetic, dependent, and relative. These understandings lead to a new way of doing theology. The relational God works differently in the world than in classical theism. The dualism that clearly separates God

and the world does not allow us to see God in the world and vice versa. But a relational understanding of God allows us to see not only God in the world but also the world in God. This relational metaphysics teaches us to view essential theological concepts in a new way. The problem of theodicy can thus be interpreted differently. Soteriology, the incarnation of Jesus, Christology, and other important theological theories can also be reinterpreted in new ways.

I want to suggest a way to seek new theological possibilities through a new perspective, especially through postcolonial Asian theology and philosophy and its variations across cultures. A theological metaphysics that is based on the philosophy of organism of Alfred North Whitehead and later theologians who agreed with his metaphysics gives us a new way of understanding God and the world and many of the relations in and among them. If we apply this organic panentheistic perspective to our view of theology, we can liberate God from the concept of God that has been defined in a dualistic context, which separates God from the world.

In the Western world, the concept of panentheism has become well known fairly recently. But the concept of panentheism is not totally new to Eastern religious traditions and philosophies. As Philip Clayton says, "[P]anentheism is not a uniquely Western product."[3] Due to its limited exposure in the Western academic world, the concept of panentheism has been primarily viewed in the West in the philosophical arena. For this reason, not many scholars in Western academia have recognized that a similar understanding of God as that in panentheism can be found in Eastern contexts. Loriliai

[3] Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher, *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities* (Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media, 2013), 378.

Biernacki says, "As ideas expressing the relations between God and world, between God and human, and, of course, between spirit and matter, versions of panentheism can be found across a broad spectrum of religious traditions and theologies."[4] Biernacki has helped to broaden our view of the panentheistic understanding of God and has shown that it is broadly found in Eastern religions and philosophies.

In this dissertation, I would like to explore the concept of panentheism in five major categories developed in Western academia that are helpful in sorting out the various types of panentheism and finding new meanings through analyzing Eastern religions and philosophies in a panentheistic view. Lastly, I will try to create a conceptual bridge that can yield a constructive understanding of panentheism from a more balanced standpoint that is rooted in concrete contexts and goes beyond the limited understandings of God in the East and the West. I do not wish to promote either side. The most valuable thing I can achieve through this project is to find a better way to understand God through a holistic and balanced lens. In this dissertation, I will mainly focus on the Korean context as my main field of study for analyzing encultured Eastern religious traditions and philosophies. I hope the resulting balanced and holistic view will be beneficial not only to Korean Christians who have been struggling to understand God with Western methodology in a context that does not contain various elements of Western methodology but also to all people who want to see God through a balanced and wholistic lens that exists in between the current perspectives of the East and the West.

[4] Loriliai Biernacki, *"Panentheism Outside the Box,"* in *Panentheism across the World's Traditions*, ed. Loriliai Biernacki and Philip Clayton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

Part I

Chapter 1

The Korean Context: Hybridization, Conflicting Symbols, and a Multilayered Culture

1.1. Imagining: Understanding the Concept of God in the Korean Christian Context

When Christianity was introduced to Korea for the first time in the late 1890s, the Christian concept of God as monotheistic, triune, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent was quite a foreign concept to Koreans who were not used to a Western framework for understanding the Ultimate Reality. Before Christianity landed on the Korean peninsula, four major religious traditions had largely influenced the religious framework of the Korean people: Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Shamanism. In particular, the Korean folk religious tradition, or shamanism, functioned as the bedrock of all the other so-called imported religious traditions from outside of the Korean peninsula. These religious/philosophical traditions were encultured in the Korean way of conceiving the world in a systematized framework that includes theism. Therefore, the concept of God in Christianity, which was quite different from Northeast Asian traditions' understanding of deities was entirely foreign to most Korean people when it was introduced by missionaries from the West.

Sung-Deuk Oak describes the situation this way: "It was very difficult for Koreans, who had lived in an agnostic or polytheistic culture, to accept monotheism and practice its demands exclusively."[1] He described Koreans' first encounter with the Christian God as not smooth but instead rather rough and confusing because the religious framework and practices of Koreans were quite different from those of the Western world. This difference has led to controversial issues in the Korean understanding of the Christian God.

This is not easy to imagine for people who have never experienced a context in which Christianity is not the dominant religion or the only religion in the culture that they were born in or in which the religious symbols of Christianity were not seamlessly embedded in the culture that they were born in. Such people cannot naturally understand the concept of a foreign God. We can imagine that the first impression that Koreans had of the Christian God was that it was unfamiliar and puzzling since the explanations of Christian God were filled with all kinds of exotic religious symbols.

Let's imagine one of many possible controversial issues. To Christians in the Western world, most have heard the name of God since day one. If you do not understand what I am trying to articulate here, perhaps you have never asked why God is called God in the Western context. God was *theos* in Greek and *Deus* in Latin, and God is "God" in English. Have you ever questioned what other terms for the deity might be? The missionaries and theologians who came to Korea in the 1800s asked themselves this exact question. What to call God in Korean in the religiously complex Korean context

[1] Sung-Deuk Oak, *The Making of Korean Christianity: Protestant Encounters with Korean Religions, 1876–1915* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 33.

was quite a challenge to them. They might have asked these questions: “Do Koreans have the same concept of God that we have?” “Can they accept the monotheistic concept of God?” “Will they accept that God should be worshipped?” “What kind of concepts of God do the religions that existed in Korea before us have?” “What is the proper word in Korean to imply all the characteristics and features of God as understood in the Western Christian tradition?” “Does the term God have any connotations for Koreans from other religions that existed in Korea before Christianity was introduced?”

I can easily come up with at least a dozen possible questions that these missionaries might have had. These are just about naming God in Korean, which is clearly a complicated process. What about introducing complicated theological concepts such as the Trinity or eschatology in Korean in the Korean context? Introducing a concept of God to a different cultural context is very difficult task. We can imagine how complicated it would be to convey not only the concept of God but also the whole set of Christian theology.

Oak notes that Korean Protestantism is a unique form of Christianity that is a hybrid between North American Christianity and a Korean spirituality based on various religions that were widely believed on the Korean peninsula. Oak comments, “The combinations of intolerance and tolerance to the otherness in Korean religions and the ongoing process of negotiations across the boundaries of Western and Eastern religions formulated the indigenous form of Protestant Christianity on Korean soil.”[2]

Consider how Koreans might have processed the concept of God taught by the missionaries from the West. The concept of the Christian God was unfamiliar to the

[2] Oak, *The Making of Korean Christianity*, xvii.

Korean people. The Christian God is unseen and does not exist in physical form. God is only one and exists by Godself but also in three persons. The three persons are distinguishable but not separable. God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-present. However, the deities that the Korean people were familiar with were many, local, had hierarchical relations with other deities, pantheistic, partially powerful, partially knowing, and temporally present. The deities in the Korean understanding were partly transcendent and at the same time partly immanent, relational, and personal. The Korean people projected the models of deities that they already had, which they had acquired from religious traditions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and shamanism, into the new concept of the Christian God. Therefore, the concept of God that was introduced to Korea contained many layers of hybridity from the beginning.

But the flip side of this story is also problematic. The process of Westernization was rapid in Korea. Missionaries introduced not only Christianity to Korea but also modern science, the modern educational system, medicine, etc. Missionaries initiated the bringing of Western civilization to Korea. Many Korean intellectuals were fascinated by the new ideas that missionaries brought to them. Naturally, a large portion of them chose to become Christian to learn and experience Western ways. They absorbed Western theological teachings. White male missionaries taught the concept of the Christian God in Korean or with the help of translators. The theological framework the missionaries had was fundamentally different from that of Korean intellectuals who were born in Korea and had been raised to be members of the elite through studying Confucianism in the hybrid culture of Korea at the time.

1.2. Influential Framework: Folk Religious Traditions and Other Religions

Religious traditions such as Confucianism and Buddhism as well as Korean indigenous folk religions (Korean shamanism) have had a large influence on the religious/philosophical framework of Koreans. Oak explains the first encounter between the Koreans who became the first generation of Korean Protestant Christians with young North American missionaries as follows:

> In their encounters with Korean religions—a mixture of shamanism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Donghak, and popular beliefs—young North American missionaries, influenced by seasoned missionaries in China, dropped their initial goal of radically displacing Korean 'heathenism' and otherness with Western Christianity. The heuristic approach that followed was based on what they learned from studying and observing Korean religions and Korean Christians' interpretation of the relationship between Western Christianity and Korean religions.[3]

Even though they made some attempts to study and mutually learn from one another, most of the missionaries still firmly maintained the finality and superiority of Christianity over Korean religions. Due to the rise of nationalism and Minjung theology[4] in Korea, Korean theologians later criticized Western missionaries and the conservative/fundamentalist Western theology that had become the core teaching of Korean Reformed churches. Additionally, after postcolonial and cultural studies

[3] Oak, *The Making of Korean Christianity*, xvi.

[4] I do not fully explain Korean Minjung theology here since it is not my intention to go into a deep understanding of Minjung theology. Still, I want to briefly explain this theology. Korean Minjung theology was influenced by Latin America's theological movement, which was called, liberation theology. That theology focused on the poor and the oppressed in unjust systems. The oppressed were to be liberated by faith and to regain their power not only in religious belief but also in society. This movement affected Korean theologians and Christians who were oppressed by the military dictatorship. They yearned for a democratic political system in South Korea. In that context, Minjung theology became popular in South Korea in the 1970s and provided the theological grounds for the democratization movement in South Korea.

influenced Korean theologians, they began to rethink and take a new perspective on traditional Korean religions. Oak explains this phenomenon as follows:

> Since the late 1990s the purveyors of postcolonialism in Korea, studies in the cultural theories of Michel Foucault, Edward Said, John Comaroff, and other scholars, have inundated academic journals with criticism of missionary Orientalism and cultural imperialism for debasing Korean religions as being inferior and primitive.[5]

It is best not to view Korean Christians as having a homogeneous agreement on theological concepts such as theism, Christology, and eschatology through the lens of Western Christianity. Rather, Korean Christians who are sitting in the pews in sanctuaries on Sundays can be understood more accurately as Christian Confucianists, Christian Buddhists, Christian shamanists, etc. The syncretistic aspect of Korean culture helps Koreans to be ready to become Korean-style Christians who are quite different from Christians in any Western country. It is a myth to believe that a religion is created in a vacuum. All religions are contextual. It is impossible to reconstruct a prototypical Christianity that is not influenced by any other religions or philosophical traditions. All religions are born into the world from the womb of contexts filled with many powerful religious symbols that are encultured in the framework of the people living in those contexts. In the case of Korea, many other religions and folk beliefs and practices had existed for a long time prior to the introduction of Christianity. It is not reasonable to deny the influences of other religions and philosophies in the formation of Korean Christianity.

Spencer Palmer noted that when the early missionaries came to Korea, they were surprised by the Koreans' readiness to accept Christianity in their own way, which was

[5] Oak, *The Making of Korean Christianity*, 9.

deeply influenced by the many religions that had existed there before Christianity and by folk beliefs. "Missionaries marveled at Korean interest in the extirpation through prayer of malevolent spirits, but demons were everywhere in shamanistic Korea, and casting them out had become a lucrative profession long before Christians arrived on the scene."[6] As described in missionaries' reports, Korea had a religious/cultural context that fit well with a shamanistic narrative. Some missionaries, as Palmer depicted, saw that Korean characteristics helped Korean people accept Jesus and his narratives, especially their seeing the Gospel narratives of exorcisms, healings, and confrontations with demonic being or power as encounters with demons. Palmer pointed out that the similarities between shamanism and Christianity contributed to the easy acceptance of Christianity in the Korean cultural context. This is an important aspect of Korean Christianity.

The shamanistic Korean culture worked in a positive way in accepting Christianity, and the shamanistic cultural particularity of Korea led many Koreans to become enthusiastic Christians. However, the Christianity that the Korean people were devoted to was somewhat different from the Christianity that the missionaries taught. As already noted, Christianity in Korea was built on the foundation of many religious traditions that were heavily influenced by Korean folk beliefs, or shamanism. Grayson articulates this aspect as follows:

> The primal religion of Korea is the original and most ancient religious tradition in Korea. . . . The primal religion of the ancient period did not disappear with the advent of Buddhism in the fourth century. Rather, it became the substratum of all Korean religious experience and has shaped the development of all religions and

[6] Spencer J. Palmer, *Korea and Christianity: The Problem of Identification with Tradition*, Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch, Monograph Series, no. 2 (Seoul: Hollym Corp., 1967), 91.

> philosophies which have been transmitted to Korea, including Buddhism, Confucianism, and Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity.[7]

I agree with Grayson's analysis of Korean religiosity. The most influential framework in Korean religiosity is shamanism. Shamanism provides a basic framework for Korean people's way of understanding God and the relation between God and the world. Other religions that were introduced and developed later in Korean peninsula were rooted in that same substratum of shamanism. This particularity in the Korean way of understanding religious traditions made Koreans interpret other religions within a specific frame. That frame influenced not only Christianity but other religions in Korea as well. Therefore, Christianity in Korea is a hybridization. The East Asian elements are the foundation of its cultural context, which is deeply linked to Koreans' thinking system. The influences that Korean Christianity received from various East Asian religious traditions and philosophies are significant. These influences give Korean Christianity a syncretic understanding of the core concepts of Christianity.

1.3. Colonialistic Approach: Mimicry

The other element we need to contemplate in the formation of Korean theology in Korean churches is the colonialistic influence that the Korean church had on missionaries from the West. I do not intend to disparage all the good works of the numerous missionaries who came from many parts of the world to spread the gospel in the Korean peninsula. I admire their devotion and sacrifices, not only their own but their families' as

[7] James Huntley Grayson, *Korea: A Religious History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 270.

well. They did astonishing work for Korea and the people of Korea. However, it is also well known that the mission of the church was accompanied by colonialistic dominance in many parts of the world, and Korea was no exception. When the missionaries arrived in Korea in the late nineteenth century, the invasions by Western empires of countries in southern hemisphere and Asia were at their peak. Unfortunately, the missionaries came into the Korean peninsula with the victorious and triumphant conquerors' robes and swords of Western imperialism. Oak puts it this way: "In fact, both the liberals and the evangelicals of the late nineteenth century attempted to conquer 'heathen religions' in Asia and Africa. A new Anglo-Saxon imperialism armed with the idea of social Darwinism advanced with a sense of the 'white man's burden' toward 'inferior' races."[8] This is similar to the process of colonialism in Africa and South America. I do not think all the Western missionaries of the late 1800s and early 1900s who came to Asia had an imperialistic view and colonialistic mindset that they applied to their mission work in the region. However, the common mentality of the times promoted an imperialistic approach to Asian cultures and religions. Many Western missionaries considered Asian religions heretical. William Elliot Griffis's writings are an example of this phenomenon. Griffis, who was an American orientalist, Congregational minister, lecturer, and prolific author,[9] stated in 1885, "These form a baneful religion that binds and holds back the souls of her

[8] Oak, *The Making of Korean Christianity*, 3.

[9] Rossiter Johnson and John Howard Brown, *The Twentieth Century Biographical Dictionary of Notable Americans* (Boston: The Biographical Society, 1904).

ten millions of people from their Creator, and to mental slavery, terror and the gross darkness of ignorance."[10]

Jesus fought against the imperial power of the Roman Empire and declared a freedom that the world could not give. But the followers of Jesus Christs worked for imperialism in the name of Jesus in many parts of globe, especially in Africa, South America, and Asia. This is a sad and ironic aspect of the history of Christianity. The gospel of peace and life, the gospel of love and healing, came together with violent conquerors. The missionaries who came to Korea were viewed as ambassadors from powerful countries and as potential helpers of the Korean dynasty, whose life was endangered like a candle before a storm. The power difference between the Korean people who converted to Christian and the missionaries was significant in many aspects. People from the West, including missionaries, soon held hegemony over the Korean people in the arenas of politics, economics, culture, religion, etc. These power differences naturally yielded an imbalanced relationship between Koreans and Westerners. Cultural imperialism overpowered the friendly fellowship or compassionate missionary work that did not incorporate a colonialistic mindset. In some missionaries' eyes, Koreans were barbarians viewed through the lens of European history. Oak described the colonialistic approach of the Western missionaries as follows: "The missionary literature has lauded the Christian triumph over heathen Korean religions."[11]

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[10] William Elliot Griffis and Hendrik Hamel, *Corea, Without and Within: Chapters on Corean History, Manners and Religion—With Hendrick Hamel's Narrative of Captivity and Travels in Corea, Annotated* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1885), 162, http://archive.org/details/coreawithoutwith00grif.

[11] Oak, *The Making of Korean Christianity*, xv.

In the newly founded churches in Korea, missionaries held the authority as teachers. Their interpretations of the Bible, their theologies, and their teachings became the norm in the Korean church. Since Christianity had been imported from outside of Korea instead of originating from within Korea, the first generation of Korean Protestant Christians (pastors and theologians as well) had no choice but to accept the Christianity that the missionaries taught them. They tried to understand the complicated theological concepts that the missionaries explained them. The missionaries' way of interpreting Christianity became the Christian way in Korea. Korean Christians have followed the missionaries' approach to faith ever since.

As a Korean theologian and Christian, I personally am grateful for all the missionaries who came to Korea. However, I do not appreciate the theologies that they brought with them and taught to Korean Christians, even though I understand that theologies are bounded by time and context. In this view, every theology has its own limitations. However, the theology of the missionaries was bounded by the late 1800s context of North America (the United States and Canada), Australia, Great Britain, French, Denmark, Belgian, and so on. These were mostly Western countries. The Great Awakening movement started in Britain and its thirteen colonies in the 1730s and 1740s. Soon, the movement became international and spread to other Western countries. The majority of the Protestant missionaries who came to Korea in the late 1800s were deeply inspired by this movement. The Great Awakening emphasized religious piety, inner conviction, sensitivity to sin, and assurance of salvation. These features inspired many people in the Korean peninsula. However, the missionaries had a rather conservative theology, similar to a fundamentalist theology, especially in their interpretation of the

Bible. As a result of this history, most of the Korean churches still have a conservative theology that is not very different from what earlier generations were taught by the missionaries in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

These limitations of the Great Awakening movement (or revival movement) in Western countries had an enormous influence on Korean Christian formation. The first generation of Korean Christians who converted to Christianity from various traditional beliefs had to comply with the teachings of the missionaries. The missionaries had the authority in interpreting the Bible, applying church traditions from the West that they had experienced to Korean churches, and teaching theological concepts and interpretations as they were trained in Western seminaries. Since Korean Christians were unfamiliar with Christianity, the best way for them to become good Christians was to follow the teachings of the missionaries. There was a power difference in terms of who could defining the normative Christianity. This was a colonial power dynamic.

It is not relevant and not important to provide evidence of how the missionaries helped the development of Korea or the great work they did to bring the Gospel to the Korean people. I want to talk instead about the relations between Koreans and the missionaries, who were associated with the colonial power of the West and at the same time who had the authority to define Christianity for Koreans. In this sense, we can imagine the best strategy for the first generation of Protestant Christians who wanted to become good Christians. The main way to do so was to assimilate the approach that the missionaries taught them. However, it was impossible for the Koreans to become the same as the missionaries in terms of their faith. They could be quite similar but at the same time not quite the same. There was a fundamental difference in how they

understood deities and deities' relations with the world. These theological concepts preexisted in the Koreans, but the missionaries might have had the erroneous belief that they and the Korean people shared the same thinking system. This led them to believe that they could explain theological concepts using word-for-word translations. Postcolonialism scholar Homi Bhabha called a similar phenomenon mimicry:

> The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power.[12]

The power dynamics in a colonial discourse lead to differences in the thinking and behaving of the colonized. Mimicry is indeterminate in terms of how the represented process of disavowal creates difference. Mimicry is not a mere repetition or a copy of the original, in this case the mimicry of the colonial powers because, in the process of being influenced, accepting, interpreting, and representing, the original changes. The original and the new version are similar but not quite the same. In this perspective, mimicry has a double articulation. This is ironic in that many people who were born in a group of people or countries have a history of colonization. The colonial experience that is vividly alive in a culture, the relations among people, and their thinking affects many aspects of life.

In the early stage of Korean Christianity, the first-generation Protestant Korean Christians experienced these ironies. These first-generation Christians had no choice but to accept what they were told by the missionaries. The missionaries' understanding of

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[12] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 122–23.

God and of various theological elements in Christianity became the norm for Korean Christians. The missionaries had the authentic authority, which was also associated with colonial power. Accepting the norm as it was presented was the best way to become a good Christian. However, it is important to ask whether this first generation of Christians understood what they were being taught in the way it was intended. They tried to understand the God from the West with their own contextual tools, their own understanding of deities in many religious traditions. This resulted in a unique Korean Christian culture. The norm for Christianity in Korea was established by the missionaries in a limited period of time, and it has rarely been challenged by Korean Christians since then due to the active working of colonial dynamics. The mimicry in Korean Christianity is distinct and powerful. Most of the Korean Protestant churches in Korea still preserve this norm from the Christian faith that was given to them over a century ago. Even though Western Christianity has greatly changed over the past hundred years, Korean Protestant churches still hold on to the norm taught by the missionaries. The Korean church's context has changed enormously during this time, but it has been taboo to challenge the existing norm in churches and seminaries. Korean Christianity may seem quite similar to Western Christianity but is, in reality, quite different due to its history.

1.4. Reflection on Korean Christian Churches

South Korea is a multireligious society. Baker explains the multireligiosity in Korean culture and history in this way: "They [Koreans] have moved from folk religion through Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism to Christianity and newer religions in a millennia-long search for an explanation of human moral frailty and a way to overcome

it."[13] As Baker notes, there have been many religions in the Korean peninsula over the centuries. He ties the Koreans' deep enthusiasm to be morally pure and perfect with their endless seeking for answers through various religions, especially Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity.

Many religions have co-existed in Korea in her long history. They have given and received tremendous influence from each other and have formed, evolved, and perished over time. Therefore, many religions in Korea that formed through these mutual influences over a long period of time in the confined space of the Korean peninsula have naturally learned from one another and have developed commonalities. For example, you can easily find elements that are deeply influenced by Confucianism in Korean Christianity, especially in Protestant churches in Korea. Usually, the male senior pastor is considered the head of the church. Just as a father has all the authority and power to rule and control everything in a Korean family, the male senior pastor is expected to take on a father-like role in the Korean church. Therefore, most Korean churches have authoritative decision-making structures and a hierarchical structure since Confucianism idealizes decision-making by wise male authorities at the top of the hierarchy. The early morning service is also unique to the Korean church. It reflects a deep influence from Korean shamanism.

Since it did not have enough time to reflect on and adapt the teachings of Western missionaries to its context, the Korean church does not have a good balance between theology and practice. As a result, many of the Christian rituals, sacraments, worships practices, prayers, and so on that are the essential practices of the Christian church are

[13] Don Baker, *Korean Spirituality* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 2.

done with more emphasis on practice rather than on theology. Naturally, this has led to a tendency in Korean churches to focus more on the practical and empirical side of Christianity rather than on a democratic decision-making system and on an intellect-based Christianity, as mainline churches in the United States have emphasized. In Korean churches, there has not been a chance to find a balance between these two different distinctive sides of Christianity. I do not think one way of belief in Christianity is superior to the other. There are many ways to interpret the gospel in particular contexts, and the historical trajectory shows that it develops with a certain randomness that comes from its particularities in different contexts. Therefore, what I want to point out here is not the superiority of one way of practicing a religion over other ways. It does not make sense to distinguish high and lower forms of a religion except when we are distinguishing religions based on their metaphysical complexities. However, in this case, a perspective or a form of evaluation should not represent yet another colonial perspective on non-Western religions. Kyŏng-jae Kim wrote about the colonial prejudice mixed with the fundamentalist theology of the early Western missionaries in Korea: "The conservative orthodox mission theologians of the late 19th and early 20th centuries regarded the cultural soil as not only lifeless but also barren and desolate, a wilderness full of poisonous weeds. . . . [The early missionaries' theological position was] fundamentalist conservative, combative anti-rationalism, a-historical futurism, and anti-cultural."[14]

The flip side of Kim's point is that one can easily find a tendency toward hybridization in Korea churches in relation to many aspects of life in the Christian faith.

[14] Kyŏng-jae Kim, *Christianity and the Encounter of Asian Religions: Method of Correlation, Fusion of Horizons, and Paradigm Shifts in the Korean Grafting Process*, Serie MISSION, no. 10 (Zoetermeer: Uitgevrij Boekencentrum, 1994), 121.

The early missionaries saw hybridization in Korean culture as poisonous weeds growing in a wilderness. These poisonous weeds were the belief in shamanism and its practices that could not be detached from the daily life of Koreans; the encultured Korean Buddhism that had existed in the Korean people for thousands of years; the belief in Confucianism that had been the supreme principle in both the daily life and politics of Koreans; and Taoism, which influenced other Korean religious beliefs deeply and was confluent with these other religions. When Korean Christianity was planted in this hybridizing cultural context, it must have gone through a process similar to that of these other religions. Korean churches have followed this tendency toward hybridization from the beginning of Korean Christianity, which reflects the features of a multireligious society. This tendency, which is unique in Korean Protestant churches, has resulted in the distinctive character of the Korean church.

The lack of theological education is also a natural result of the origins of the Korean church since all the important things done in the Korean church focused on the more practical and empirical sides of Christianity. The pastors in churches have not been an exception to this phenomenon. Korean pastors put more energy into conducting Christian practices such as early morning prayers, Wednesday evening services, Friday night services, Sunday services, and so on rather than learning a sound and well-balanced theology. The lack of theological education in Korean church means that the pastors pass on syncretistic teachings to their congregations. These teachings are a mixture of the indigenousness religions and popular religions that have long existed on the Korean peninsula. The syncretistic teachings in Korean churches are effective in helping the congregants to understand the strange concepts of the imported religion of Christianity.

Sometimes, Jesus is explained as a shaman. When congregants hear an explanation that is familiar to them, they can understand the concept more easily. Jesus has at times been described as a shaman who mediates between this world and the world beyond. At the same time, Jesus is understood as a figure who can change the mind of the most powerful deity, which is the God of Christianity.

Confucianism has also exerted a powerful influence on Korean Christianity. Most Korean Protestant churches have a rigid hierarchical structure. The senior pastor is mostly regarded as the head of the church, which is similar to Confucianism's way of structuring a society in a patriarchal system. The head pastor is given great authority, just as a patriarchal society gives concentrated power to the king, the leader of a group, the elderly person, and the father in a family. In Korean churches, the male senior pastor usually has superior authority over any other leader in the church. As in Confucianism, asking questions is not recommended, and rejecting authority is regarded as rebellious and as harmful to the unity of the community. Therefore, if the leader of a church has goodwill in faith and is well prepared to lead the congregation in a theologically sound way, then this system works well. In contrast, if the leader is not properly equipped or is corrupt, this can have disastrous results. In many cases, the centralized structure of power in Korean churches does not work well. At the same time, the rigid hierarchical and patriarchal decision-making system is built on the conservative culture in Korean churches. Theological differences are not tolerated in this climate.

The Korean church cannot escape its cultural context. Therefore, ironically, even academically progressive seminarians have a very conservative faith because their faith formation is bounded by the cultural context of the Korean church. I believe this

contextual particularity of Korean churches has also resulted in a particular understanding of God. In the next section, I make a link between the Korean way of understanding God and panentheism.

1.5. Korean Churches' Understanding of God and Panentheism

There are many Christian denominations in Korea. Here, I will use as an example the Korean Presbyterian church, which has many denominations. The liturgy, order of worship, sacraments, and confessions of faith that are the most important elements in the Presbyterian Church (USA) have been weakened or simplified or neglected in Korean Presbyterian denominations. On the other hand, the liturgies that fit well with the Korean context have been reinforced and have become popular, such as Korean-style prayer, daily early morning services, Wednesday services, and Friday overnight services. These are the Korean church's unique features of contextualization. Not only the visible elements of Christianity but also the invisible elements such as the concept of God, worldview, and various theological understandings are influenced by the contextual character of the Korean church that has been enculturated for long time.

I have already explained that Korean society has been significantly influenced by multiple religious traditions, including Korean folk religion or shamanism. As a result, people in Korea have a hybridized understanding of God that cannot explained by any one religious tradition. The understanding of God in Korea has accumulated, changed, and developed in the context of conflicting symbols found in numerous religious traditions. Therefore, the concept of God in the Korean context is not simple; it has multiple layers of complexity. In addition, the colonial experience in late nineteenth and

early twentieth century influenced Korean Christians to establish a normative understanding of God based not on the Korean way of understanding God but on the teachings of Western missionaries. This led to an internal discrepancy in the understanding of God held by most Korean Christians.

The model of God that the missionaries brought to Korea was based on Greek philosophy's dualism, which pictured God as a cold-minded creator who created the world and then stayed away from it with folded arms. God in this model was not acceptable to the Korean way of understanding deities. In many cases, the deities that were familiar in the Korean context were immanent and transcendent, intimate, and alienated (mysterious), fundamentally both related and beyond relatedness. This may sound like antinomy. However, in the Korean way of understanding God, these concepts are not mutually incompatible. At the same time, this understanding allows a new space, especially in the Western understanding of God that sees these concepts as paradoxical, for the imagining of a deeper understanding in God, not only for Korean Christians who have been confined in their understanding of God to the norm that the missionaries taught but also to all Christians who were not brought up in these encultured contexts.

Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridization is that it is an escape from the influence of modernity, which is based on coloniality. He argues that it is important to bring good values and relevant ideas to the reality that is based on the culture that people share together and virtues from other cultures and hybridize them. Going back to the original way of thinking does not work. In fact, it should be noted that the Christian understanding of God did not originate in America. The effort to discover or purify a particular culture or intellectual knowledge system is pointless. It would be better to

create an improved version drawing on the given elements, which leads to hybridized cultures that may be seen as chaotic but are also full of creativity and potentiality.

Chapter 2

Why Theism Matters in the Korean Church

A panentheistic understanding of God is found in various religious traditions in Northeast Asian cultures. It is natural for people born in these cultures to understand a deity or deities in a panentheistic way. However, when Christian missionaries came to the Korean peninsula, they taught the people a concept of God that was based on Western philosophy and that understood God in a very different way. The Korean people accepted the foreign concept of God from the Western missionaries with their preexisting understanding of deities from various northeast Asian religious traditions. This caused them to develop a unique Korean Protestant culture of understanding of God in Korea.

The consequences of this trajectory have not been entirely positive. The Korean Christian understanding of God based on the Korean understanding of deities has not been interpreted in ways that yield wholistic and healthy methods that are beneficial for Christian theology overall. In the process, some heretic leaders have emerged and have claimed that their interpretations of the Bible are the only authentic message God has authorized. Their interpretations are opposed to orthodox Christian churches in Korea, which are Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, and so on. *Christian Today* (a Korean newspaper) noted that eighty-six organizations were categorized as heretical

between 1915 and 2018.[1] Many of these were churches with faiths that were syncretic with religions that had been popular in Northeast Asia for many years, especially shamanism. Their understandings of God are deeply linked to shamanism's interpretation of gods' will in earthly affairs.

Not only the heretical groups but also orthodox Korean Christians' understanding of the Christian God is problematic. Korean Christians' interpretation of the Christian God is also affected by the preunderstandings of old religions that existed before Christianity. The religious symbols from other religions and thinking structures, which must be used in the interpretation of the understanding of God in Christianity, are intertwined throughout Korean culture. No one can escape this influence if they are born and raised in the culture. Therefore, Korean Christians have worn a cloth that they inherited from the missionaries, but it has not fit their bodies well for over one hundred years. The Christian God they were taught about through the Western thinking system did not fit well with their own understanding of deities or gods in their culture. This gap has provided a precarious space that heretic leaders have taken advantage of.

Through this project, I hope I can present a better understanding of God to Korean Christians so they can find a cloth that fits them well and that comes from their ancestors. If the panentheistic understanding of God in the Northeast Asian perspective works well for Korean Christians, it could also help Christians all over the world to see God through an unfamiliar lens that might reveal a part of the mystery that has not been illuminated

[1] Chung, Yoonsuk, "Idan Myeongchingman Arado Idane Ppajiji Anhneunda" 이단 명칭만 알아도 이단에 빠지지 않는다 [If you only know the name of a heresy, you will not fall into that heresy], *Christian Today*, January 20, 2019, http://www.christiantoday.us/25725.

before using the single old Western lens. We will never be able to have a complete picture of God with our various lenses. But I have discovered that some lenses are better than others.

Hasakazu Inagaki and J. Nelson Jennings wrote in *Philosophical Theology and East-West Dialogue*[2] that early Japanese thinkers and theologians made an effort to deconstruct the Greek-influenced concept of God and humanity. They tried to reconstruct the foreign concepts using their own linguistic and philosophical traditions. The authors selected Kitaro Nishida, the founder of modern Japanese philosophy, as an example. Similar attempts were also made in Korea by early Christian theologians such as Yŏng-mo Yu, Seok-heon Ham, and Seon-hwan Byeon. These Korean thinkers tried to interpret Western theology in the Korean context. They developed Korean contextual theology as Kitaro Nishida did in Japan. The mere translation of Western-language words into Japanese or Korean could not convey the philosophical concepts well. Since the thinking process and the categories of philosophical understanding are different, the true meaning is difficult to convey via the symbols in different thinking and language systems. Therefore, a process of interpretation is essential in order to understand abstract and conceptual symbols. This is why there is the saying that all theology is contextual.

Likewise, the concept of God in Christianity, ever since it was introduced to the Korean peninsula, has been challenged by the philosophical and linguistic differences between the East and the West. This gap or gray area, which was not properly explained by the philosophical and theological frameworks, has caused misunderstandings in

[2] Hisakazu Inagaki and J. Nelson Jennings, *Philosophical Theology and East-West Dialogue*, Currents of Encounter 15 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 7.

Korean churches. This phenomenon has fueled Christian-related heresies in Korea for many years. Theism, especially, is a difficult theological theme to explain to Koreans through a literal interpretation using Chinese letters, which themselves have connotations related to Asian religions or philosophy. For example, the doctrine of the holy Trinity was introduced by missionaries to Koreans. Western languages based on Greek and Latin, in comparison with East Asian languages in general, focus more on the analysis of an individual object. In contrast, East Asian languages focus more on relations and on how all individuals connect to one another. Therefore, Western languages use more nouns and East Asian languages use more verbs. These cultural differences, which are deeply related to worldview, affect the understanding of abstract concepts. In the explanation of the concept of the holy Trinity, Western theology focuses on essences, unchanging attributes, and individual persons. The East Asian understanding of deities, in contrast, usually goes along with the language's indications of relational dynamics, infinite and constant change, and a communal society. These distinctive philosophical differences are reflected in the languages of various cultures, and these differences lead to gaps in understanding the abstract metaphysics in theism.

There is a specific characteristic of Christian-related heresies in Korea. Many of them share a common aspect in their dogma related to theism. Modalistic monarchianism, also known as modalism, is the primary understanding of God that Korean heresies share. According to *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, "Modalism refers to any account of the Trinity in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are regarded as features

of God's relationship to creation rather than as intrinsic to God's eternal being."[3] In this understanding, the three persons in the Triune God are merely three modes or manifestations of the one supreme deity, and in many cases the one essence belongs to the Father, the creator. This understanding of God has been criticized as heresy in the early Christian churches since it does not fully explain the relationships and interactions among the three persons in God that are depicted in the Bible and the church tradition.

If we follow this model, then the descriptions of the relationships among the three persons in God can be reduced to a divine play. This has one benefit in explaining the Trinity, which is that it explains the equality of the three persons in God more effectively than others. This may be why some heresies make use of this model; it is easier to understand than the Trinitarian model, which is hard to grasp. Also the heretical leaders effectively put their own status equal to the supreme God in the Trinity since they can claim that they are one of the manifestations of God. I speculate that a misinterpretation of teachings on theism caused by the metaphysical differences between the Eastern and Western worlds affected this phenomenon, specifically related to the doctrine of the Trinity. If Western missionaries to Korea had taught the doctrine of the Trinity from the viewpoint of perichoresis, it would have been much better than the ontological explanation based on a dualistic understanding of the world, which easily results in modalism.

The leaders of Korean heresies used this gap in the understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity to persuade many Korean Christians to come to their churches. For

[3] Ian A McFarland et al., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 318, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511781285.

example, Berea Theological Seminary, which is a theological institution representing the Sungrak church in Korea and is widely accepted as a heretic Christian-related denomination, teaches modalism as their main understanding of theism and uses this non-Trinitarian dogma to persuade its followers. If Korean Christians had a better understanding of theism, especially the doctrine of the Trinity, it would not be so easy for heretical leaders to win over mainline church members to their side. The Greek- and Latin-based languages that the early missionaries to Korea mainly used are based on "being" rather than "becoming," which means they focus on ontological metaphysics. But the metaphysics that Koreans commonly share is more focused on the relationality of things without a distinction between subject and object. All things possibly prehend and are prehended. In this sense, the theory of *perichoresis* from the Eastern Orthodox church might help Koreans understand the mystery of the Trinity with their own metaphysics.

The Eastern Orthodox church is comprised of Christian communities related to the Byzantine tradition in church history. The Eastern Orthodox church has played an important role in the history and culture of Greece, Eastern Europe (including Anatolia), Russia, the Caucasus, and the Near East. The Eastern Orthodox tradition had a specific theological trajectory, which is apophaticism, also known as negative theology. This is a form of Christian theology that simultaneously affirms the transcendence and the immanence of God. As I explained earlier, Asian religions have a similar understanding to this negative theology of the Eastern Orthodox church. As a result, the theory of perichoresis is more appealing to Koreans than explanations from Western church traditions (Catholicism and Protestantism). The word *perichoresis* comes from the Latin *circumincessio,* which can be translated as co-inherence or mutual interpenetration. This

concept is used to explain the mysterious relationship among the three persons in the doctrine of the Trinity. Using a social analogy, the three persons in the Trinity mutually contain one another and penetrate the natures of the others in a dynamic cycle (movement around a circle). The image of the three persons dancing together while holding each other's hands exemplifies the social relationship in the Trinity. The metaphysics behind the concept of *perichoresis* is closer to the Asian notion of connection, which is relational, both/and, and constant changing, than it is to Western notions of the Trinity.

Establishing a sound understanding of God is crucial for the Korean church to stand on a solid foundation, especially considering that the Korean church is not currently helping its members to understand God with better images. The Korean church has been using a selective understanding of God that is explained by its two different cultural influences that are fundamentally incompatible. If the Korean church adopts a sound and coherent theological understanding of God that can complement, rather than contradict, the understanding of God found in Korean culture, the Korean church will be healthier. The current problematic theism of the Korean church helps heretical religious leaders who are looking for opportunities to win over members of the Korean church who are confused by the church's understanding of God.

Part II

Chapter 3

What Is Panentheism? The Trajectory of Panentheism in the Western World

3.1. Pantheism versus Panentheism: What Is the Difference?

In our understanding of the concept of God, we apply many unspoken elements. Usually, we do not think clearly about the kinds of features or attributes we attach to the depiction of God we are imagining when we speak of God. Are we picturing an old white male who has a full beard and is kind and generous-looking, such as Michelangelo's frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel? This is an example from the Western world. People from the Eastern world might picture a statue of the Buddha sitting with a generous and peaceful smile on his face. Is the image of God we are picturing transcendent or immanent in its relations with the world? Is the image of God we are imagining a deity that has the attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence? Does the God that we are picturing interfere in worldly events that we are experiencing?

As these theological and philosophical questions indicate, the understanding of God is not a simple matter. Developing an image of God is a complex and complicated work because of the multi-layered factors to consider in a concept of God. Naturally, since understanding God is a difficult task, many people have suggested various ways to understand the concept of God throughout human history. I do not want to review all the models of theism that humans have invented over the eons. However, in this chapter I

will present and compare the two most important concepts of God for this dissertation, which are pantheism and panentheism. Then, I will briefly survey the history of panentheism in the Western world.

Stephen Palmquist defines pantheism as follows: "Pantheism is the belief that God exists but only in the sense that God is identical with the physical world and/or everything in it (i.e., everything is God)."[1] In pantheism, God is the world and the world is God. This belief has a theological difficulty, especially for theologians in Christianity. If God is the world, God is fully immanent in everything, but this means that God cannot transcend the world because God is bounded by it. A pantheistic God is limited by the boundaries of the physical world. However, Christian belief confesses that God is not only immanent in the world but at the same time is transcendent from the world. Due to this conflict, Christian theology has not been associated with pantheism.

However, pan*en*theism is different from pantheism. Philip Clayton notes, "At its simplest, panentheism is a model of the God-world relation that emphasizes inclusion rather than separation. It holds that the world is contained within the divine, although God is also more than the world."[2] The literal meaning of panentheism is all-in-God-ism. As Clayton points out, panentheism is a theistic model that pictures God in a both/and, immanent/transcendent relationship with the world. All is in God, but God is more than the world. Panentheism brings God's mystery into the conceptual frame of reason to understand God. Clayton puts this in intellectual and conceptual but at the same time very

[1] Stephen Palmquist, "Kant's Moral Panentheism," in *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*, ed. Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher (New York: Springer, 2012), 401.

[2] Philip Clayton, "Introduction to Panentheism," in *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*, ed. Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher (New York: Springer, 2012), 371.

concrete and empirical terms: "Panentheistic theologies tend to be dialectical, however, affirming complementarities rather than forcing final decisions between them: the divine is both immanent and transcendent, including all things within it while also existing as more than the world."[3] Clayton's explanation illuminates that the concept of panentheism lies beyond the dualistic definition of traditional Western classical theism, which is based on the metaphysics in Platonism. The possibility of imaging God as both/and opens a new path to seeing God from a different angle.

The great process theologian Charles Hartshorne, who brought Whiteheadian philosophy into the realm of theology and established the fundamental system of process theology in the twentieth century, elaborated on the concept of panentheism. In fact, he became the most influential scholar of panentheism in the world. His definition of panentheism has five attributes indicated by the letters E, T, C, K, and W for eternal, temporal, conscious, knowing, and world-inclusive.[4] God in panentheism has these five essential attributes in relation with the world. God is eternal and at the same time God appears in temporality, which represents the temporal attribute of God. God is self-aware, which means that God is conscious. God also knows the world, and God does not abandon the world, which means God is world-inclusive. Hartshorne's five attributes of God in panentheism laid the foundation for the understanding of panentheism in the West.

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[3] Philip Clayton, "Panentheism in the Tapestry of Traditions," in *Panentheism across the World's Traditions*, ed. Loriliai Biernacki and Philip Clayton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 201.

[4] Charles Hartshorne and William L Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 16.

Even though many scholars have defined various forms of panentheism, we may imagine a generic or general form of panentheism that lies in the common ground of the various theories. Niels Henrik Gregersen defined a broad or general concept of panentheism that includes the following two elements:

1. God contains the world, yet is also more than the world. Accordingly, the world is (in some sense) "in God."
2. As contained "in God," the world not only derives its existence from God but also returns to God, while preserving the characteristics of being a creature. Accordingly, the relations between God and world are (in some sense) bilateral.[5]

First, Gregersen points out that a general concept of panentheism includes the element that the world includes God but at the same time God exceeds the world and the world is in God. This explains the immanent and transcendent aspects of God in relation to the world in panentheism. Secondly, the interaction between God and the world is mutual, and God accepts feedback from the world. This relationship between God and the world is mutually inclusive, but at the same time there is a qualitative difference because the existence of the world depends on God. I agree with Gregersen's definition of generic panentheism. It offers a helpful outline of the basic shared elements of the concept of panentheism.

Despite the benefit of this definition to a better understanding of the God concept, we still have difficulty defining panentheism. There are multi-layered meanings in

[5] Niels Gregersen, "Three Varieties of Panentheism," in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World*, ed. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 22.

panentheism. Multiple scholars and traditions have understood the God concept in panentheistic ways, but differences exist among them. We cannot measure all the implicit panentheistic views in human history, according to Loriliai Biernacki, because history typically "forgets that much of the world has throughout history grappled with views of God that entail a panentheistic worldview (and, with this, perhaps also an implicit acceptance of some key premises of science, even if they have not been accompanied by the same technological advancements that exemplify our own era)."[6] However, it is definitely beneficial to "unfamiliarize" the familiar God concept with a different perspective, especially for serious seekers who want to understand God as well as they can. Panentheism provides a valuable tool for doing that. However, Christians who hold the traditional theological concept of God view panentheism with suspicion. Their image of a monotheistic and unchanging God hinders them from accepting the concept of God in panentheism. It is not easy to find common ground between panentheism and the traditional understanding of God in Christianity, especially if God's attributes are viewed as all-powerful, all-knowable, and all-present.

3.2. A Brief Historical Survey of pPanentheism

As stated earlier, panentheism is a relatively recent development in Western theology, but some theologians, especially process theologians such as Cobb and Hartshorne, believe there have been thinkers who can be categorized as panentheistic thinkers throughout Christian history. In this case, an official theological definition by

[6] Loriliai Biernacki, "Panentheism Outside the Box," in *Panentheism across the World's Traditions*, ed. Loriliai Biernacki and Philip Clayton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4.

academia does not matter much because in human history there always has been a way for the panentheistic understanding of deities. John Culp puts it in this way. "[V]arious advocates and critics of panentheism find evidence of incipient or implicit forms of panentheism present in religious thought as early as 1300 BCE."[7]

Asian cultures in particular have had an understanding of deities that is similar to that of panentheism. Knowing this, if I tried to write the historical trajectory of panentheism through different cultures, that topic alone would be too long for a book. Therefore, I will only briefly outline the history of panentheism in the Western world.

Hartshorne regarded Plato as a panentheistic thinker. Many scholars still argue over the kind of panentheism Plato subscribed to or whether his understanding of the divine was explicitly panentheistic. Dirk Baltzly analyzed Plato's *Timaeus* with these questions.[8] He says that Hartshorne and Reese thought Plato was not panentheist enough in *Timaeus* even though they agreed that he would have been if he had pursued that direction of thinking further. Meanwhile, John W. Cooper has a different idea. He argues that there is not enough evidence to tell whether Plato was panentheist in *Timaeus*. Baltzly concludes that Plato's understanding of the divine was quite panentheistic because of the relationship between encosmic gods and a creator god that fits a panentheistic relationship. The creator god and the cosmos are not identical, but the cosmos depends on the creator god, as in panentheism. Then, in the modern era, Karl Krause is known as the first scholar to explicitly use the label of panentheism, which he

[7] John Culp, "Panentheism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2020 Edition),* ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/panentheism/.

[8] Dirk Baltzly, "Is Plato's Timaeus Panentheistic?," *Sophia* 49, no. 2 (June 2010): 193–215, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-010-0170-z.

did in 1829.[9] Between Plato and Krause, numerous theologians and thinkers have shared similar ideas about the divine. I mention several of these scholars who can be categorized as panentheist in chapter 5.

Even though many of the scholars I categorize as panentheist did not explicitly announce or recognize themselves as such, they can still be conceptualized as implicitly panentheist, as John Cooper also noted. Clayton also pointed out, in a brief historical survey from Plato to Giordanno Bruno, that we can identify some scholars as a group who utilized a panentheistic framework.[10] Clayton and Cooper argue that the following thinkers can be categorized as panentheist: Proclus, Pseudo-Dionysius, Plotinus, Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, Jonathan Edwards, and Freidrich Schleiermacher. They each tried to articulate the relational connection between God and the world but at the same time illuminated the distinction between God and the world (or humans) that indicates that God is more than the world. In this way, they can be understood as panentheist.

These threads of thought in understandings God were constructively developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by Henri Bergson and Alfred Whitehead. Later, process theologians Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb, and David Griffin elaborated further the process philosophy that understands God as being affected by the events of the world. In process theology, God is considered as having two natures: the consequent nature of God prehends[11] the worldly events that are in process, and the primordial nature of God

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[9] Culp, "Panentheism."

[10] Philip Clayton, "Introduction to Panentheism" in Diller and Kasher, *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*, 374.

[11] Prehension is the technical term used by Alfred North Whitehead to explain his metaphysical understanding of the world and of God. John B. Cobb Jr. explains this term in his book *Whitehead Word Book: A Glossary with Alphabetical Index to Technical Terms in Process*

envisages all potentialities and possibilities of the world. In this understanding, God is constantly changing in the sense that God prehends worldly events and receives them in the consequent nature, and at the same time God is more than the actual world due to the primordial nature of God, which has all the actualized and non-actualized events of the world in it. John B. Cobb Jr. explained about two natures of God, primordial nature and consequent nature, as follow. "Whitehead calls God's ordering of eternal objects for the sake of realizing value in the world, God's 'primordial nature.' He thinks of this ordering as a single nontemporal act, preceding and conditioning every actual occasion."[12] Primordial nature of God is also called conceptual nature of God. Whitehead thinks that God has two poles, one is conceptual pole, and the other is physical pole. (Primordial nature is equivalent to conceptual pole and consequent nature of God is interchangeable with physical pole in God.) The conceptual pole itself is not an actual. The actual occasion has experienced both physical and conceptual feeling and prehension in the process of becoming since it is actual in the world. The conceptual pole (primordial nature of God) provides potentialities to the actual entities and the fundamental settings of the actual world which are expressed as eternal objects above. On the other hand, God's prehensions of actual occasions (actual entities) constitute God's consequent nature (physical pole). God feels and conceives all the drops of experience from all actual entities in the actual world. Cobb says, "This aspect of God [consequent nature of God] is

and Realilty (Anoka, MN.: Process Century Press, 2015): "[Prehension] consists in an objective datum as well as a subjective form. The objective datum is what it prehends. The subjective form is how it prehends it. In the simplest case, we have a prehension of a single actual occasion, so that the objective datum is the aspect of that occasion that is prehended" (31). Prehension includes both sensory feeling and cognitive conceiving at the same time. Prehension achieves a high-level and holistic understanding of objective datum.

[12] Cobb, *Whitehead Word Book*, 69.

affected by everything that happens in the world It is in this sense 'consequent' upon the world. Whitehead calls the physical pole of God, the 'consequent nature.'"[13] The consequent nature of God implies that God is affected by the worldly events and God actively receives (feels or prehends) them. By the changes and expansions of the actual world, God's experience grows accordingly. God's two natures interact with the actual world and all things happen in the world. In this sense, God is transcendent of the world (by the transcendent aspect in primordial nature of God), and at the same time God is in/with the world as an actual entity, and the world is in God as well (by the imminent aspect of consequent nature of God). Process theism is categorized as panentheism in this sense.

Process theologians' efforts to elaborate the concept of panentheism influenced theologians and philosophers who study other religions or philosophical traditions in various cultures other than Christianity. Even though the concept of panentheism is a relatively recent development in Western academia, panentheistic understandings of God have existed in other religions and traditions for a long time. The only problem is that these understandings have not yet been called panentheism in these other religions. However, a panentheistic understanding of the divine has existed for a long time. Niels H. Gregersen states, "But even though panentheistic systems are relatively new, we have seen that the basic intuitions and metaphors of panentheism can be traced further back in religious tradition."[14] As Gregersen points out, similar metaphors exist in other religions such as Hinduism (as Clayton explained well in his article "Panentheisms East and

[13] Cobb, *Whitehead Word Book*, 70.
[14] Gregersen, "Three Varieties of Panentheism," 34.

West,"[15]), Buddhism, Confucianism, and Korean shamanism (see chapter 6). The field of panentheism is no longer confined to Christian theology or Western philosophy. The boundaries of the field are expanding beyond the limitations of academic dialogue in the West.

Now we go back to the contextual dialogue in understanding the concept of God in various cultures. It is possible that we might discover a better panentheistic understanding of God through a process of comparative studies in religions and philosophies of the East and West. In particular, contextual theologies in Asia might illuminate areas that are neglected or unseen by people who are more familiar with Western philosophy. A philosophy focused on substance is not suitable for solving the paradox of the both/and problem in panentheism. I identify this as a general problem with the theism that developed in the West. According to Inagaki and Jennings, Kitaro Nishida's understanding of God somehow compounds the paradoxical elements in the concept. "In a word, Nishida's idea of God is immanence-*sive*-transcendence, or panentheism"[16] (where *sive* means inseparable, nonidentifiable, irreversible).[17] Nishida, a Japanese contextual philosopher, found a way to navigate the unresolved paradox in contextual hybrid theology. Inagaki and Jennings point out that dialogue between East and West might offer an opportunity to reconsider fundamental presuppositions in theology; it would not harm either side but rather would be helpful to both. "Moreover, within that dialogue Western theology may be forced to reconsider, at a deep level, some

[15] Philip Clayton, "Panentheisms East and West," *Sophia* 49 (June 1, 2010): 183–91, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-010-0181-9.

[16] Inagaki and Jennings, *Philosophical Theology and East-West Dialogue*, 59.

[17] Inagaki and Jennings, *Philosophical Theology and East-West Dialogue*, 23.

of its assured presuppositions. More than anything else, that means a liberation of Christian theology from the influence of Greek philosophy. After all, Greek thought is very different from the Bible itself."[18] As Inagaki and Jennings point out, the expansion of the boundaries and the limitation that we have confined ourselves to in our one-sided perspective opens another door of possibility that may enlighten us, teach us, and help us understand God better. This is not a zero-sum game in which the East and the West are competing against one another. Such a dialogue is mutually beneficial. I believe a new era has just begun in the study of panentheism. The new era will focus on not one religion but will expand beyond the limitations of individual religions to search for and bring better tools for understanding the mystery of God.

[18] Inagaki and Jennings, *Philosophical Theology and East-West Dialogue*, 31.

Chapter 4

Comparative Methodology in Panentheism

Northeast Asian religions do not fit well into the definition of theism that Western scholars have been using, including Cooper. However, Cooper's five categories can be helpful as a methodology for categorizing these ancient but active Asian religious traditions. Some are practiced as an independent religion, such as Buddhism. Others do not exist as an independent religion but as hybrid religions that either incorporate aspects of other religions or provide substantial religious/philosophical elements and frameworks to others. Overall, Northeast Asian religious traditions share a commonality that can be categorized as "pan-en-theistic." In this chapter, I discuss comparative thinkers whose major comparative studies have focused on Western and Eastern religions. Francis X. Clooney and Paul Knitter studied Christianity in comparison to Asian religions in depth. Their studies illustrate the comparative methodology that this project employs in calling for a synthesized panentheism, one that encompasses a panentheistic understanding of God, especially within Asian cultures.

Francis X. Clooney, an eminent scholar in comparative religious studies, describes his thinking on comparative methodologies as follows: "A truly comparative moment does not arise in the volumes comprising the Comparative Religious Ideas Project, but the methodology of the individual chapters does provide a template for

reading one's home tradition."[1] He points out that a set of meta-analyses of textually located concepts in comparative religious studies can convey only superficial and conceptual comparisons. This does not help researchers determine how the practitioners and thinkers of a particular religion interpret and feel about their religious concepts. Rather, it is more like a learning process among people coming from different cultural, theological, and philosophical backgrounds and at the same time from different religious experiences. Clooney puts it this way: "Comparative theology is therefore comparative because it is interreligious and complex in its appropriation of one's own and another tradition in relation to one another. In some instances this comparison may involve evaluation, but ordinarily the priority is more simply the dynamics of a back-and-forth learning."[2]

Clooney suggests that the methodology of a comparative religious study should be both intellectual and experiential. If we do not have any categories or structures for our academic studies, then everything will be confused and it will be hard to make a meaningful advance. On the other hand, if we lose the religious experience in a comparative study, we will miss the most significant part in religious study—what is experienced and expressed in and through practitioners' religious practices. This is not an either/or choice but is a both/and matter. We need to engage with those who are intelligently faithful to a tradition/or traditions and who are bold enough to seek a fresh understanding outside of their tradition.

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[1] Francis X. Clooney, *New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation* (London: Continuum International, 2010), 101.

[2] Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 11.

This method reminds me of St. Anselm's famous norm, "faith seeking understanding: (*fides quaerens intellectum*). Clooney regards this as the operative principle in doing comparative theology with other religions. This operative principle seems quite far from the methodology of comparative theology. However, it gives us an image of the attitude needed for a comparative theologian who is approaching other religions. One's a priori knowledge of a certain religion can be biased by the influence of the doctrines of one's religion or religious experience, which is unique and contextual. A comparative theologian might make the mistake of evaluating other religions from their own religious biases, even without knowing they are doing so. In this sense, Clooney's methods include having an "operative principle," which helps a comparative theologian access other religions in a mutually respectful manner, and a "wholistic intellectual and experiential learning process," which indicates the importance of firsthand and experiential knowledge in the understanding of a religion. No one can claim that they own or have complete understanding of a religion. Rather, it is an unending process of learning. Clooney's methodologies in comparative theology are essential for comparative theologians.

Paul F. Knitter is an ordained Roman Catholic priest and a comparative theologian who has written many articles and books. In his provocative book *Without the Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, he uses a unique technique for doing comparative theology between Christianity as his home religion and Buddhism as an equally important religion. He writes, "All of these chapters have a common architecture: in the first part I state my problems in affirming Christian beliefs, the second describes my efforts to 'pass over' to Buddhism, and the third part summarizes what I think I can learn

when I 'pass back' to my Christian identity and belief."[3] Knitter's method of "passing over" and "passing back" is beneficial in comparative theology, especially if the researcher has a religion of their own. Having one's own religion is critical for a comparative theology study. Clooney also points out that having religious knowledge is not enough to learn a religion. Religious experience that one can know and feel fully only comes when the researcher truly becomes a sincere practitioner of a religion. This experience cannot be transmitted through our limited language system, which cannot contain all mysterious religious experience. A truthful religious experience is more than well-written sentences. It transcends our mundane experience and brings us to the realm of divine mystery. Therefore, starting from one's own religious experience is exceptionally beneficial in understanding other religions.

Knitter suggests that one should go to the edge (or border) of religious understanding learned from a home religion (doctrine/knowledge and experience) and should even go further and cross the border in order to fully sink into the other religion. In this stage, one should get rid of all priori knowledge or experience that could hinder the researcher from encountering and embracing the other religion without any prejudice. This is "passing over" and is the second phase of Knitter's methodology of comparative theology. Once the researcher/practitioner has fully explored, understood, and experienced the other religion well enough, they should "pass back" to where the journey began. In this third phase, the returned researcher can look at their home religion with fresh eyes. This process enables one to become unfamiliar with one's own religion and

[3] Paul F Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 6.

find new insights from other religions. Along with Clooney's method, Knitter's method illuminates the essential point in doing comparative theology.

Knitter also provides a useful methodology for doing intercultural/cross-cultural comparative studies. Knitter questions what the standard is in studying comparative theology and philosophy across different cultures. For example, he points out that Christianity, which many Westerners believe contains universal truth, actually does not. He argues that Christianity does not reflect universal truth; instead, it presents a Western version of a contextualization of Jesus' message. In the world of theology (and beyond), this Western-centered view has some problems. If a culture has a different metaphysics, understanding of the Ultimate Reality, or views in its religion from the Western world, then the Western-centered view may consider that the culture does not fit with the universal norm. In a comparative study, this can cause a significant flaw. He writes, "For westerners, this dipolarity opens a new, perhaps perplexing, perspective on what it means to experience God and to talk about that experience."[4]

Knitter formulated a new model that implies a complementarity that extends beyond the imagination of most Westerners' understanding of the ultimate truth. He suggests that a new model that comes from wisdom can be found in many Eastern religions that have very different understandings about God based on a different metaphysics from that of the West. He uses the term "relational truth" to reflect what cannot be contained in the dualistic binaries that many Western thinkers rely on to understand the Ultimate Reality. He gives an example from Taoism. "The Taoist

[4] Paul F Knitter, *No Other Name?A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*, American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), chap. 10, EbscoHost.

ontological principle of yin-yang tries to state this same dynamic 'coincidence of opposites' that makes up all reality, especially ultimate reality."[5] The relation of yin and yang seems to be of opposite binaries, which represents an irreconcilable polarity. However, the concept of 'coincidence of opposites' suggests seeing this relation from a different angle. For example, a curve and a straight line are opposite in the realm of the finite world. If the radius of a circle is infinitely long, then the perimeter of the curve coincides with the straight line. In other words, yin and yang can be understood as the opposites in a finite snapshot of reality. However, if the relation of yin and yang is not static but is in an endless dynamic of changing, then these two concepts of the opposites coincide.

This example leads to the notion that when studying comparative religions and philosophies in different cultural settings, scholars should recognize and step outside of the fictionalized norms that are vaguely believed to be universal by their own culture. We can only have a contextualized, situated, and phenomenal universality, but this is not universal at all. "Christians are becoming aware that 'catholic' (with a small or capital C) Christianity is not very catholic at all. The reality signified by the word 'Christianity' is not a 'catholic' region-that is, a religion embodied in the whole world, in the different cultures of the nations."[6] The notion of a universal Christianity may be a myth that was spread by the colonial framework. Knitter articulates that the message of Jesus Christ (the message of the Jew) was widely accepted and actively interpreted in Western culture. Later, the Western conception of Christ and Christianity was claimed to be the only interpretation of the gospel; therefore, the missionaries' task was to faithfully convey this

[5] Knitter, *No Other Name?*, chap. 10.
[6] Knitter, *No Other Name?*, chap. 10.

only and original message to the rest of the world. However, as Knitter also pointed out, although this interpretation was hugely popular and became mainline in Western culture, it is hard to claim that it is the only and exclusive interpretation. It is rather an inculturation of Christianity in the West. This is a Eurocentric view of Christianity and the world's religions. Thus, we should imagine what would be other inculturations in other cultures. This methodology suggests that we need to start to explore decolonized religions, which are enhanced by the dipolarity of intercultural comparative studies. In this study, this methodology will be used to envision a Northeast Asian view of panentheism.

In searching for a new panentheistic understanding from a Northeast Asian view, simply comparing the texts or dogmas and a set of meta-analyses may not be very helpful. Thus, in this project, I may have a slight advantage in doing a comparative study of the Northeast Asian view of panentheism due to the fact that I have experienced both worlds. As I have indicated, Korean culture is rich in Northeast Asian religious/philosophical traditions, and these elements are encultured not only in Korean culture but also in the Korean language and the thinking framework that reflects the Korean's worldview and shows how Koreans understand the relationship between the world and the deities.

In addition, my family tradition has conveyed to me extensive firsthand knowledge and experience of Buddhism, Confucianism, and shamanism. My family lineage goes back around two thousand years, reaching the Silla dynasty. My great-grandfather built a Buddhist temple in Seoul, Korea, to express his faithfulness to Buddhism. When I was young, I remember my grandfather performing a Confucian ritual

in which he periodically worshipped the spirits of his ancestors. He wore the full traditional costume when he presided over the ceremonies as the head of the family. These Confucian rituals and traditions peacefully co-existed with Buddhist faith in my family. This religiously and culturally rich legacy of family traditions was transmitted to the next generations. I was greatly influenced by observing and participating in my family's rituals and traditions. Even though I was not an official practitioner of any of the religious traditions, like many other Koreans I was unintentionally strongly influenced by these northeast Asian traditions because I was born and raised in the culture. For these reasons, I have not discounted my experiences as a Korean when studying comparative theology for this project. Rather, I have used my experience as one of my sources or references for academic inspiration. I believe this is what Clooney and Knitter suggest is a better way to do comparative studies in religion.

In the next chapter, I discuss Cooper's five categories for various theories and thinkers in the field of panentheism. I have found that this approach provides a systematic standard for comparing Northeast Asian religious traditions from the perspective of panentheism. Through this work I will show, first, that the categories developed in Western academia can be used in comparative work in analyzing Northeast Asian religious traditions in a meaningful way. Second, through this analysis we can get to the insight that Northeast Asian religious traditions have an innate concept of deities through a panentheistic perspective. Third, this will lead us to the final destination of this project, which is the redefinition of panentheism from a northeast Asian perspective.

Chapter 5

Categorical Panentheism

5.1. Implicit and Explicit Panentheism

The first category that John W. Cooper uses to distinguish the diverse theories on panentheism is implicit versus explicit. The distinction between implicit and explicit panentheism is based on the stance of the thinker. Cooper indicates that this distinction is important due to the diverse understandings of panentheism. Even though a thinker does not use the term explicitly, if the definition of panentheism matches their theories, then they are considered panentheistic. According to Cooper, Plotinus, Nicholas of Cusa, Hegel, and Teilhard de Chardin are all implicit panentheists in that their definition of theism meets that of panentheism but these thinkers did not explicitly use the term. Some lived before the term was used widely and were categorized as pantheists instead. However, contemporary thinkers such as Harthorne and Moltmann explicitly characterized themselves as panentheists.

Northeast Asian religions should be categorized as implicit panentheism since Asian religions developed their own ways of understanding the deities that are quite different from Western ways. Cooper comments, “With respect to some [theologians], I conclude no more than that they are probable or virtual panentheists because their

positions are not explicit enough to allow definite identification."[1] Asian religions incorporate panentheistic concepts in their understanding of deities, but they are not explicitly panentheistic.

5.2. Personal and Nonpersonal Panentheism

God is depicted as the ground of being, the ultimate cause of everything, and the source of all by many philosophers and theologians. In this view, God is frequently described as having personhood and as able to interact with the creatures, but this concept of God is not appropriate to be defined as a person. Since transcendent attributes are emphasized in this view, the concept of God is more than a singular person defined as an individual. God is rather abstract, which is beyond the concreteness of a tangible being. In contrast, Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb and Jürgen Moltmann see God as the ultimate personal and relational being. It might be problematic to say that all thinkers see God as personal in panentheism because God is both/and personal and nonpersonal for process theologians, but beyond that, God is relational. In process thought, God is sometimes depicted as a universal principle that controls all things, but at the same time God is also understood as personal (as a being). Thus, if we take a broader view of this category, we start to realize that it is hard to draw a clear line. Northeast Asian religions see deities as personal (as beings) who have relationships with humans and nature and intervene in worldly events. At the same time, it is also true that the supreme reality provides the foundations and principles of the universe (Tian in Confucianism and nature in Taoism).

[1] John W. Cooper, *Panentheism, the Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 28.

Therefore, in this category we need to say that Northeast Asian religions have a both/and personal and nonpersonal panentheistic understanding of the Ultimate Reality.

5.3. Part-Whole and Relational Panentheism

In the God-world relationship, there are two distinct views in the panentheistic understanding. One sees the world as a part of God's nature. In this view, the world exists in God, and thus the state of the world is understood as "being in God." However, in this case God is not equal to the world; if that is the case, then the religion is not panentheistic. Conceiving of God as greater than the world fits better with the definition of panentheism. So, the world is emanated from God but is a part of the whole; God exceeds the world.

The other view is that God and the world are relational and have an intimate relationship. God and the world share the same ontological purpose. God and the world can be depicted as in a symbiotic relationship. Northeast Asian religions have a relational understanding of the God- world relationship. In Northeast Asian religions, the deities are described as those who provide principles not only for human life, the society, and the country but also the universe (Confucianism). The deities are concerned with the fate of all humankind and with salvation (Buddhism). They look after human beings by foretelling disastrous events or by blessing them with what they are longing for (shamanism).

5.4. Voluntary and Natural Panentheism

In this category, the important question is whether God can exist without a world. If the answer is yes, then the religion is voluntary panentheism. In this view, God is self-sufficient and needs no world to be fully God. Creating a world is not essential to God. Therefore, in this view, God voluntarily creates a world as a form of self-expression of the divine creativity. In contrast, if the answer is no, that means the existence of a world is a necessity to God. This is related to God's nature. Neoplatonism's understanding of God's nature is similar to this view. The Neoplatonists understood that God "overflows" (emanates) into lesser kinds of being (this is a hierarchical view). God's nature cannot stop sharing Godself with others. Similarly, natural panentheists think that God is love and the act of creation is the expression of God's love toward everything. God cannot love without having something other than Godself to love, and thus God cannot be God without creating something (to love by God's nature). Therefore, a world is inevitable for God because of God's loving nature.

Both views represent Christian understandings of the relationship between God and the world. It makes sense to align deism with voluntary panentheism. In deism, God freely creates a world and has a minimal relationship with it or none at all. In this view, God's self-sufficiency is maximized. However, the relationship with earthly beings is minimized. On the other hand, natural panentheism fits well with the Christian understanding of a God who loves, protects, and saves God's creatures and interacts with them. Theologically, this approach goes well with the understanding that God loves the world and saves it from its fallen status.

Northeast Asian religions have a different understanding of the God-world relationship. There is no distinct and dualistic separation between the two. The deities are in the world and, at the same time, they transcend the world. The relationship between God and the world is more organic than a mechanical dualistic distinction between the two. God and the world are intertwined with one another. Natural panentheism is close to the Northeast Asian view.

5.5. Classical and Modern Panentheism: The Freedom of Creatures to Affect God

The last category is related to divine omnipotence and to the question of whether God is affected by others. In classical panentheism, God is not affected by anything, including God's creatures, even when all things are in God. In contrast, in modern panentheism, beginning with Schelling, the creatures' freedom has a correlation with God's existence, which means God can be affected by others. This view goes against the traditional understanding of divine omnipotence, but it does conform to stories in the Bible. Many figures in the Bible who are held up as exemplary cases of faith in God are described as having an intimate relationship with God and even as influencing God to change God's decision or will. But if the creatures can affect the creator and change an essential aspect of the hierarchically superior being, then the whole logical system collapses. Therefore, in the history of Christian theology, the classical view of God, even in panentheism, has prevailed. However, modern thinkers such as process theologians understand God's omnipotence in a very different way.

Northeast Asian religions have modern panentheistic view of deities. Deities are interacting with humans and intervening in earthly events. This is especially true in shamanism because the purpose of shamanistic practices is to change spirits' minds or decisions that have already been made regarding something that will happen in the future. Shamans perform *gut* (rituals) to change the decisions of deities. In Confucianism, Tian has its own way of providing principles to the universe, but sometimes it is also believed that Tian can change its mind due to the good work of a human with good intentions and wholeheartedness.

In this chapter, I used Cooper's categorical analysis to examine the various layers in panentheism. This analysis is the foundation for calling for a synthesized model for Northeast Asian panentheism. In the following chapter, I will analyze three major Korean religions (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shamanism) to reveal their panentheistic theisms.

Part III

Chapter 6

The Model of Panentheism and Views of God in Three Major Northeast Asian Religious Traditions

6.1. Buddhism: "Hetero-Pan-En-Theism"

Buddhism is a nontheistic religion, or what some people prefer to call a way of life instead of a religion, in contrast to theistic religions. However, we need to think about the definition of a religion in many different contexts. The definition of religion in the Western way of thinking does not fit well with Buddhism. Buddhist metaphysics is different from Western metaphysics. From the perspective of Western theology's category of theism, Buddhism is nontheistic. However, in Buddhism there are divine figures that do not perfectly correspond to Western theology. The term "God" in Christianity (or gods in other theistic religions) is not exactly equivalent to deities in Buddhism, but there are in fact deities in Buddhism, such as Dharmakaya, Buddha or Adi-Buddha, and Tathagata, that are possibly related to the concept of Ultimate Reality. There may be a huge difference in theism between West and East. However, if we start to look at the differences from a new angle, we may find undiscovered similarities.

Sungae Ko, who has studied Jonghong Park, a Korean Buddhist scholar, points out that Park's work was important and meaningful in understanding Korean Buddhism in

relation to Korean metaphysics, which is the fundamental soil for all Korean thought. Ko describes Park's work as follows.

> Jonghong Park, who majored in Western philosophy, tried to prove through research on traditional Korean thought that it was simply undiscovered or had been veiled for long time due to the fact that elements of Western philosophy were already included in traditional Korean thinking but were expressed in different ways.[1]

As Park notes, the difference in metaphysics between East and West may have led to different ways of explaining philosophical concepts. However, even though the mode of expressing the concepts is different, the concepts themselves may not be very different. The uniqueness of Koreanness formulates the views in a certain direction, as is true for other cultures. Korean thought cannot be separated from the Korean way of thinking, and Koreans' unique way of thinking cannot be conceived apart from the Korean language, which consists of accumulated communal experiences in history, societal agreements, cultural influences and taboos, religious beliefs, shared worldviews, cosmology, and metaphysics. As long as the Korean language exists on earth, the unique Korean way of thinking will also exist. Korean thought cannot be absent in any case. However, the uniqueness of the culture and the differences in the modes of seeing things do not guarantee that these two or even cultures that are different do not share common elements in their thinking.

The purpose of this project is based on this question as well. In this project, I am trying to prove that the major religious traditions that have had an immense influence on

[1] Sungae Ko, "Bakjonghongui hangukbulgyosasange daehan yeongu" 박종홍의 한국불교사상에 대한 연구 [A study of Park Jong-Hong's Korean Buddhist thought], *Dong-A Mun-Hwa: The Journal of S.N.U. Institute for Asian Studies* 51 (2013): 47.

Korean thought include the elements of panentheism in their theologies and practices, even though no one has identified these elements as panentheistic in the past.

The unique Koreanness in traditional Korean thought, which Ko well expressed as "Korean thought digested and absorbed in our lives and our words,"[2] results from a process of wholistic inculturation in Korean culture. Park actually paid attention to Confucianism and Buddhist thought. He saw that both of these ancient religious traditions were absorbed into the lives of Koreans through a long process of transmission, interaction, and acceptance through which these two religious traditions had a great influence on Korean thinking.

Buddhist scholar Jongmyung Kim studied how early Buddhism was spread throughout ancient China and how it was changed into contextualized Chinese Buddhism in Chinese culture through its interaction with indigenous traditional Chinses religions. Similarly, his study can be applied to as a method, how we can understand Korean contextualized Buddhism. He pointed out that the version of Buddhism that was introduced Korea (in the time of Three Kingdoms around 4–6 CE) through China was different from the early Buddhism that originated in India.

> Along with the temporal and spatial development of Buddhism, its character also changed, and the belief in the health and wealth gospel (prosperity gospel) based on the concept of *karma* was a representative example. Early Buddhism, which had undergone contextualization in India, spread to Central Asia and then from Central Asia to China. The Buddhism [that] spread to China went through a process of Chineseization, and therefore the Buddhism that was first introduced into ancient Korea was also a Chineseized Buddhist tradition.[3]

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[2] Ko, "Bakjonghongui hangukbulgyosasange daehan yeongu," 51.

[3] Jongmyung Kim, "Godae hangugui sesokbulgyo: Giwon, jeongae mit baegyeong" 고대 한국의 세속불교: 기원, 전개 및 배경 [Secular Buddhism in ancient Korea: Its origins, development, and background], *Journal of the Korean Association for Buddhist Studies* 93 (2020): 256.

Over a long period of time, the original character of Buddhism has been gradually changed through its numerous encounters with various cultures and religions. Kim mentioned that even in India, after Buddha's death, the character of Buddhism rapidly changed into a secular religion:

> In Buddhism, which developed through time and space after the Buddha's death, prosperity in life and magical elements were rather emphasized. Buddhism changed to belief for sake of the achievement of worldly ends, and the believers became more and more dependent on magical ideas and rituals in the handling of problems in daily life. Even in India, the belief in prosperity permeated Buddhism.[4]

Kim uses the concept of 'secular Buddhism' to explain the phenomenon of the self-serving form of religiosity. Secular Buddhism is a form of Buddhism (which contrasts somewhat with early Buddhism in terms of the purpose of having faith) that usually involves prayers for good fortune or supernatural miracles and material blessings. Sometimes this also means that Buddhism can be used as a means to rule over people with a political agenda.

The purpose of early Buddhism seems to be different from that of secular Buddhism. However, throughout the history of Buddhism, as it interacted and interrelated with many other religions and cultures in different times and places, it became something else. I am not claiming here that Buddhism evolved into a different religion. But, the emphasis and the main theology changed. When it came to China, the process of Chineseization added many elements that were not included in early Buddhism. At the same time, the practices in Buddhism and the main emphasis were interpreted differently in China and were strongly affected by the indigenous religions of Confucianism, and Taoism. In a similar way, when it was introduced into Korea, Buddhism had already been

[4] Kim, "Godae hangugui sesokbulgyo: Giwon, jeongae mit baegyeong," 260.

saturated with the prosperity gospel in India, syncretized with Hinduism and indigenous religions in India, and Chineseized in Chinese culture. Therefore, the prototype of Korean Buddhism is unclear—we can only imagine what it looked like thousands of years ago—but it is certain that it was very different from the early Buddhism from Sakyamuni.

The other important aspect in this contextualization of Buddhism as it spread through evangelism is the changing views on theism. Kim articulates this as follows:

> Intellectuals at the time [when Buddhism was introduced into China], when Buddhism was being accepted and developed, either had an incorrect or a limited understanding of Buddhism. Unlike in early Buddhism, they [the intellectuals in China] regarded the Buddha as a divine being, Buddhism as a religious system to acquire the salvation that comes from an otherworldly divine being, and the order of Buddhism as an object of state control.[5]

In the process of its contextualization in China, Buddhism was accepted in a very different way compared to early Buddhism. It gained theistic elements and developed not only one deity, the Buddha, but also many others. And believers in Buddhism needed to work on their salvation, which would not come from inside their mind but from an outer divine power. This was a significant change in theology. So, when Buddhism was introduced to the Korean peninsula, the intellectuals and people who maintained the religious and political hegemony naturally accepted Buddhism as such and used it for their own agenda. In general, Buddhism helped the leaders of dynasties and nations to control people. The most significant point is that Korean Buddhism had theistic elements that were introduced through the Chinese version of Buddhism; then, after it came to Korea, it developed further through syncretistic fusion and concrescence.

[5] Kim, "Godae hangugui sesokbulgyo: Giwon, jeongae mit baegyeong," 256.

Buddhist scholar Youngseop Ko describes the contextualization of Korean Buddhism in this way:

> The Buddhism that was introduced as a new social phenomenon in ancient Korea was in conflict with the indigenous beliefs in the heavenly gods and the mountain gods, as well as the shamanic beliefs that merged with these beliefs, but at the same time these beliefs converged together while reinforcing one another.[6]

Ko pointed out that the Buddhism that was imported into Korean culture underwent a long process of converging and synergizing with the traditional religions that were already embedded in Korean culture. The fact that Buddhism did not have an exclusive stance toward other religions was greatly beneficial in the process of contextualization. Specifically, he noted that not only Korean shamanism but also indigenous beliefs that were expressed in Korean mythologies, such as the foundation myth (the story of Dangun) and beliefs in the heavenly gods and the mountain gods, influenced and transformed the Korean contextualized version of Buddhism.

Ko also mentions theistic elements in Korean Buddhism:

> Buddhism was able to be contextualized in the Korean soil because it maintained its inclusive stance and attitude that embraces the truth of other religions without being hostile to the enculturation processes of other religions. At the same time, the unique tolerance and clemency of Buddhism that acknowledges and accepts other religions' differences also contributed to its contextualization. Thus, Buddhist beliefs in, for example, Maitreya Bodhisattva, Guanyin Bodhisattva, and Amitabha Bodhisattva were able to spread widely in Korea.[7]

Buddhism in Korea assimilated indigenous beliefs and religious concepts into Buddha's teaching and edified people in this way. Buddhism was not exclusive and could

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[6] Youngseop Ko, "Hanguk godaebulgyoui tochakhwawa gusimhwa—Yunghwawa gyohwareul jungsimeuro" 한국 고대불교의 토착화와 구심화—融和와 敎化를 중심으로 [The naturalization and centripetalization of ancient Buddhism of Korea—Focusing on harmony and reformation], *Journal of the Korean Association for Buddhist Studies* 75 (2015): 178.

[7] Ko, "Hanguk godaebulgyoui tochakhwawa gusimhwa," 146.

coexist with many religions that had already gained influence in the Korean peninsula, such as Taoism, Confucianism, and folk religions. The contextualized Korean Buddhism focused on the distinct Bodhisattvas that represent prosperities and blessings in life, both in the current life and in the afterlife. Through these elements, Korean Buddhism became a religion who practitioners seek not only the great awakening but also salvation, which is given by divine beings. Thus, it becomes clear that Korean Buddhism can be categorized as a theistic religion that seeks otherworldly and divine salvation and that it envisions various deities who bring the salvation to the world.

According to Don Baker,

> Most Koreans believe that [overcoming obstacles in life] is accomplished by making connections with invisible forces more powerful than they are. Whether those invisible forces were Buddhist deities or should be better understood as the undifferentiated, all-encompassing thusness called Buddha nature was less important than the transcendence of individual limitations effected by linking with those forces.[8]

Thus, Korean Buddhists have faith in many Buddhist deities that transcend various situational limitations. Korean Buddhism has a polytheistic aspect in the sense that it can be labeled as syncretic since philosophical practices of Buddhism such as studying the sutras are combined with religious desires that are derived from Korean folk religions whose goal is to escape from bad luck and unfavorable life situations or to gain material prosperity in life. Korean Buddhism has many deities, so it can be described as a "hetero" religion. As an antonym to homogeneous, the term heterogeneous implies that a hetero religion is different from monotheism (or theism), is divergent in its understanding of deities, and has diverse images of deities. In this sense, Korean Buddhism can be

[8] Baker, *Korean Spirituality*, 41–42.

categorized a religion that has a “hetero” theism. This implies that Korean Buddhism can be considered a form of “hetero” theism. Now we need to determine whether Korean Buddhism can be categorized as pan- and en- theism.

Seokjoo Kim, a Buddhist scholar, in his article “A Study of the Buddhist Interpretation of Shen (神) in Zongbing (宗炳)’s “Mingfu-Lun (「明佛論」),” explains how Buddhism, which originated in India, came to China and converged with the traditional concept of religion in China.

> In the 4th to 5th centuries in China, various Buddhist scriptures were translated into Chinese and influenced thought in China. In this process, the understanding of Buddhist doctrine was made in connection with Hyeonhak. Hyeonhak is a philosophical methodology that explores the principles and origins of human nature and the universe with a focus on the Protagonist, Lao-tzu, and Chuang-tzu. In the translation of the Buddhist scriptures the philosophical terms of Hyeonhak were used to interpret the major Buddhist concepts.[9]

When early Buddhism was introduced to ancient China in the fourth and fifth centuries, Buddhism was a foreign religion to Chinese culture and the Chinese people. The scriptures were written in Sanskrit, which Chinese people could not understand. The whole religion needed to be translated to fit the Chinese context. As Kim explains, China had a philosophical methodology that sought the fundamental truths of nature, the universe, the human, and society. Scholars used the Chinese indigenous philosophical concepts, which came primarily from Confucianism and Taoism, in their interpretation of

[9] Seokjoo Kim, “Jongbyeongui myeongbullone natanan sinui bulgyojeok haeseoge daehan gochal” 종병(宗炳)의 명불론(明佛論)에 나타난 신(神)의 불교적 해석에 대한 고찰 [A study of the Buddhist interpretation of Shen (神) in Zongbing (宗炳)’s “Mingfu-Lun (明佛論」)], *Studies in Religion* 79 (2019): 100, https://doi.org/10.21457/kars.2019.08.79.2.99.

Buddhism to the Chinese people. Thus, a foreign religion imported from India was harmoniously fused with traditional Chinese philosophy and accepted.

At that time, Gyeogui was also popular. This was a collection of interpretations of doctrines and philosophical concepts in Buddhism through the main texts of Hyeonhak. The main texts of Confucianism and Taoism were used to explain Buddhist doctrines and concepts. In other words, as the traditional Chinese concept of God was also used in translating and interpreting Buddhist scriptures at the time, a close connection among these different religions was established. This was a unique syncretism that led to the acceptance of the foreign religion of Buddhism.

In his article, Kim mainly explains Jongbing's Mingfu-Lun, which contains Jongbing's interpretation of Shen (god) in Buddhism through the lens of Confucianism and Taoism. It examines how the traditional Chinese concept of deity was interpreted in the process of interpreting and accepting Buddhist scriptures. Kim articulates Jongbing's understanding of the Buddhist doctrine of god in a concise formula.

1. $U = A$
2. $A \supset B$
3. $A = Aa \cup Ab$
4. $B \supset Ab$[10]

U indicates Ultimate Reality (deity or god). A represents god in great-self (or true-self). A consists of Aa and Ab. Aa does not have a physical form; therefore, it represents a pure deity that is not bounded by any physical form. Meanwhile, Ab is related to a

[10] Kim, "Jongbyeongui myeongbullone natanan sinui bulgyojeok haeseoge daehan gochal," 107.

physical form. This means that the spirit of god is related to a physical form. In this case, it represents a sage (saint) who holds the spirit of god in themself while manifesting in a human body. B signifies god(s) in all beings. The Ultimate Reality is equal to all gods, but it can also mean some of the gods. This is usually the case since god does not hold a physical form. However, the spirit of god that is manifested in the body of sages is also counted as god. Therefore, in this systemic understanding of god that Jongbing suggested, Ultimate Reality is equal to the sum of the gods or the gods' spirit.

The god in great-self includes the gods in all beings. If we put together 1 and 2, then we create the formula U ⊃ A ⊃ B, which can be shortened to U ⊃ B. Then, we can interpret the formula as follows. Ultimate Reality includes the gods in all beings that is manifested in all individuals' entities. Jongbing's interpretation of god in Buddhism, which is based on his understanding of Confucianism and Taoism and possibly Chinese indigenous thought, expresses exactly the same relationship between God and the world as is found in panentheism. Kim explains the formula with an analogy of the ocean and a wave. Ultimate Reality itself includes all gods, like the ocean (U = A). There is a response according to this relationship, and that is the wave that forms the shape. The ocean water that makes up the waves is the gods of all beings (B). A wave (B) emerges from the calm ocean (Aa) without any waves. There is a sage, the awakened (Ab), who teaches that the original ocean and the waves are not different from each other. Judging from this formula, eventually the ocean and the waves are no longer different. The ocean and the waves are same ocean and are not different from one another. A sage is also the ocean, which is not different from the gods in all beings, and is at the same time a wave.

The way the deities in Buddhism function in relation to the world and how they engage with humans is quite different from Western theism. These deities' ways of existing and engaging with the world is more easily understood through the lens of panentheism. Buddhist metaphysics is based on the interconnectedness and relationality of myriad things. The deities work in relation to the worldly things in the world, so it is "pan-en." Buddhism's panentheistic understanding of God and the world does not see the deities as separate from the world; they remain in the world and work with myriad things in relationality. Thus, the deities are interconnected with all life in the universe. In Buddhism, all beings are viewed as fundamentally related to one another. This idea is different from the understanding of monadism, in which all beings exist individually and are not internally or externally connected to one another existentially. Buddhism can thus be categorized as implicit, personal/nonpersonal, relational, natural, and modern panentheism.

Due to these influences from Buddhism, Korean Christianity understands God as panentheistic, meaning that God becomes the source of all beings and provides fundamental principles to the universe that uphold everything in their right places. The understanding of all beings as interconnected with each other has greatly influenced Korean Christians' understanding of God, which is not an understanding of God based on Western dualism but is a panentheistic understanding based on the Korean context.

6.2. Confucianism: "Mono-Pan-En-Theism"

Confucianism is grounded in ancient Chinese metaphysics, which is different from Western theism. It is well known as a form of religious humanism that focuses on the

area of ethics and the ordering of human society. Hongkyung Kim wrote, "Based on this barometer [the religious barometer of whether a household performs rituals for ancestors], it has been boldly declared that more than half of the entire population in Korea could be considered Confucian."[11] It is possible that this analysis by Hongkyung Kim is a bit of an exaggeration since there are many Koreans who do not consider Confucianism an institutionalized religion. Important rituals in Confucianism such as ancestor worship can be done by practitioners of other institutionalized religions such as Catholicism and Buddhism, but not Protestantism. The bottom line, as Kim stated, is that many Koreans still perform Confucianist rituals as important religious practices. Confucianism plays an important role in Koreans' religious life.

Traditional Confucianism originated during the Western Zhou dynasty from the thinking of Confucius. It developed its philosophical theory in dialogue with the other major religious traditions in China, Buddhism and Taoism. Later, the restructured theory was called neo-Confucianism, which bloomed in the Joseon Dynasty in the Korean peninsula. Neo-Confucianism has elements that make connections to Western metaphysics possible for discerning whether it can be categorized under organic panentheism. The relationship between the Ultimate Reality, Tian (Heaven), and the derived realities, the myriad things under Tian, is the basic understanding of all related things in the universe in Confucianism. This understanding appears similar to that of the relationship between God and the world in Christian theology. Jungseo Koo pointed out the similarity as follows:

[11] Hongkyung Kim, "A Party for the Spirits: Ritual Practice in Confucianism," in *Religions of Korea in Practice*, ed. Robert E. Buswell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 167.

> When Christianity was introduced to Korea under the name of Catholicism at the end of the Joseon Dynasty, the first friction occurred between religions rather than indigenous beliefs. However, Confucianism and Catholicism could not essentially conflict. The center of Catholicism is to serve the creator 'Ultimate Reality' as a divine being, and even in the Confucian culture, there was originally an idea of 'Ultimate Reality'. In the poetry sutras, Analects, and other classic scriptures, the use of heaven in the meaning of 'You must not disobey the heavenly commandment' and 'Only Heaven (Tian) knows me' is generally referring to 'Ultimate Reality'.[12]

Koo pays attention to the word *sangje*, which is expressed as the supreme deity who rules and judges all things in The Book of Documents. *Sangje* means the Ultimate Reality (like Heaven and Tian) spoken of in Confucianism. It was natural to translate God in Catholicism to *sangje* in Korean when the missionaries brought Christianity to Korea. This makes sense because *sangje* and God are each depicted as a righteous and supernatural providence over the world. In this respect, Koo argues that Christianity would have been relatively easy to accept in Confucian culture. Since the Tian of Confucianism has many similarities with the God of Christianity, people could have accepted the foreign concept without much objection.

Tian is an all-encompassing, constantly changing, and creative cosmic power that permeates everything. Its metaphysics addresses the order of the universe and how it changes. The vital energies yin and yang are the basic elements of the universe. The interaction of these energies brings about changes, movement, and other dynamics. Tian is a principle of the universe and is the supreme source of all principles. The most important and highest value in Confucianism is the Mandate of Heaven (天命). Fulfilling the Mandate of Heaven is the most meaningful purpose in life for all things. Since all

[12] Jungseo Koo, "Hanguk Jeontongmunhwa Sogui Sin" 한국 전통문화 속의 신 [God in Korean traditional culture], *Gidokgyosasang* 26, no. 11 (1982): 102.

things are interconnected to one another, all existence is meaningful; all comes from the principle of Tian. All are interconnected and play a part in the universal principle. In this sense, we can say that Confucianism, even though it is different from the Western definition of monotheism, has a "mono-istic" theism. However, Tian does not work like any of the deities in other religions, who have personality, characteristics, and emotions as they interact with the world and humans. From this perspective, we can say Confucianism is nontheistic. Tian is more like a universal principle that the world depends on, but the theo–world relationship is different from that in Western religions. The interconnectedness that is a principle of Tian indicates that the mandates of Tian are everywhere and that they are the ultimate foundation of all beings. In this sense, Confucianism is panentheistic. Tian is not equal to the world but is deeply linked to the world; it not only provides the principles of chance, movements, and dynamics but is also an abstract concept that exceeds the world itself.

Daseok Youngmo Ryu's interpretation of God (the Christian concept of God, but not limited to the Christian concept), in his synthesis view of religion based on Korean traditional thought, may be helpful here. Daseok is a Korean theologian with a unique position in the field of Korean religious philosophy. He tries to understand Christian theology, which is rooted in Western philosophy, based on a deep understanding of Korean indigenous ideology and Asian religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Donghak, and indigenous Korean religions). Daseok's theology builds a naturalistic and organic theism, breaking away from the dichotomy of Western philosophy that looks at the relationship between God and world. He points out the limitations of Western philosophical thinking in its perspective on God. He presents an integrated and holistic

(syncretic hybrid) theology that encompasses Western and Eastern thought, making it possible to have a deeper understanding of God.

Daseok's theology is explained by the concept of 'God without existence.' Breaking away from the limits of substantialism, it explains that the 'things that are not' and the 'things that are' are not different from each other in the end. 'Being' is something that can be thought of with 'non-existence,' and paradoxically, through the concept of 'emptiness,' the existence of the present existence is explained. If there is no existence, there is no concept of emptiness. Therefore, Daseok's theology is interpreted as panentheism. According to Heeheon Kim, Daseok's

> understanding of religion is that Buddhism's concept of emptiness (空) and Taoism's concept of nothingness (無) are applied to Christianity's concept of God, and it is the incomparable Asian ontology that makes its application possible. In other words, his theology is paradoxical, which is fundamentally different from Western thinking based on the Western classical metaphysics that understands the way of existence of things as a concept of 'simple location,' that is, a certain substance occupying a certain space supported by classical Western physics. In Daseok's thinking, existence and non-existence, matter and spirit, and God and world are not separated from each other but form a paradoxical relationship of mutual inclusion.[13]

This paradoxical concept that God exists everywhere but not exist at the same time asserts that God is everywhere, which goes beyond the ontological way of being in Western philosophy. Such a God has a transcendence that transcends existence. Based on this philosophical thought, Daseok combines the concept of God with the Confucian ideology of faithfulness (which can also be translated as integrity, 誠) and filial piety (孝).

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[13] Heeheon Kim, "Daseok yuyeongmoui jayeonjuuijeok yusinrone daehan sogo" 다석 유영모의 자연주의적 유신론에 대한 소고(小考) [On Daseok Yu Young-Mo's naturalistic theism in dialogue with process panentheism and deep pantheism], *Theological Forum* 87 (2017): 96.

Through the connection between the panentheistic understanding of God and the major Confucianism ideas, he suggests a way to fulfill Confucian ideology in life through the recognition of God. He presents the need to live a religious life in a Confucian way through ethical practices that are fulfilled in the community and society with a heart of self-emptiness.

The changing and becoming process experienced by each determinate thing within Tian is a manifestation of Tian's creative power and is grounded in the Ultimate Polarity (*Tae-Kuk*). This refers to all the creative powers that are embodied and brought about in the "becomings" of all concrete things. This creative power of Tian seems to be similar to a panentheistic understanding of God that sees God's transcendent aspect as residing in the imminent world and as bringing newness and novelty from that world.

Confucianism is one of the most influential religious traditions in Korean culture. As I stated earlier, Korean Christianity is a hybridization of many religious traditions. In this sense, the attributes of Tian in Confucianism can easily be transmitted to the Christian God. Therefore, in Korean Christianity, God is seen as a supreme power that establishes balance in the universe (or multiverses) and harmony between yin and yang in the dynamics of change. The Christian God is understood as the conductor of a universal orchestra, in a sense. Therefore, knowing God's will is extremely important in Korean Christianity because knowing the mandate of Tian is very important in Confucianism. The panentheistic understanding of Tian in Confucianism is a good match with the concept of God in Christianity; Korean Christians can understand God through Confucianism's panentheistic understanding of Tian.

Considering these distinctive features of Korean Confucianism, it can thus be categorized as implicit, personal/nonpersonal, relational, natural, and modern panentheism in Cooper's framework, and it can be also seen as mono-pan-en-theism.

6.3. Shamanism: "Hetero-Pan-En-Theism"

Shamanism is the most powerful religious tradition in Korean culture. It is not known when it began or how much influence it had on other religions in Korea, but it is certain that the influence was enormous. Korean folk religions are mainly based on *Jae-Chun* (worshiping heaven), but the extensive culture of animism, which is also called shamanism, is widespread in all parts of the Korean peninsula. Some Korean Christians put their hands together in a Buddhist temple as Buddhist monks do and even go to see a fortune teller or *Mudang* (Korean shaman) to hear the oracle from the deities or escape bad luck, as do people who believe in folk religions (including contextualized Taoism, shamanism, and various forms of animism, etc.), and perform ancestor worship when family members pass away, as Confucianists do in their rituals.

Shamanism absorbs other religions and assimilates with them rather easily. As Buddhism changed when it reached Korea, so other religions were also affected by shamanism. Religions in Korea share various elements. Over long periods of time, these phenomena have been reinforced by the persistent power of shamanism. Religious scholar Jeongtae Jang explains shamanism's influence on other religions as follows:

> Indigenous religion (including shamanism) is closely related to the experience of religious phenomena in Koreans. It is true that Korean indigenous religion as a living belief system that has been handed down for a long time has had many

> effects on Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity, which are called higher religions.[14]

Korean indigenous religion has had deep connections to the religious/philosophical metaphysics that constructs the thinking system of Korean culture. The myth of Dangun shows a belief in heavenly gods and mountain gods as well as animism and totemism. The term Dangun comes from the word meaning shaman in Korean. Therefore, the Korean foundation myth of the world is deeply related to Korean indigenous religion. Jang also notes that shamanism syncretizes with other religions.

> It is impossible to discuss the Christian faith without an understanding of shamanism. Indigenous religion, which can be called a foundation of Koreans' religious mentality, has power, and changes all religions and ideologies. Korean indigenous religion does not reject foreign religions but rather accepts them without resistance.[15]

Through this process of assimilation, Korean indigenous shamanism made foreign religions incorporate shamanistic elements in their belief system or religious practices. Koreans have a shamanic worldview and live by forming human relationships in a Confucian way. At the same time, Koreans see the world through the lens of Buddhist metaphysics. They also accept Christian love as an ideal form of action. This is a complex understanding that has a multireligious and syncretistic structure.

Protestant missionary Homer B. Hulbert, who was active in the Joseon Dynasty at the end of the nineteenth century, wrote in his book *The Passing of Korea*: "It is for this reason that I conclude that the underlying religion of the Korean, the foundation upon which all else is mere superstructure, is his original spirit-worship. In this term are

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[14] Jungtae Jang, "Hangukbulgyowa mingansinangui honhaphyeonsang" 한국불교와 민간신앙의 혼합현상 [Syncretism of Korean Buddhism and folk beliefs], *Korean Thought And Culture* 96 (2019): 99.

[15] Jang, "Hangukbulgyowa mingansinangui honhaphyeonsang," 99.

included animism, shamanism, fetishism, and nature-worship generally."[16] Hulbert points out correctly that although there are foreign religions that were more institutionalized and had intricate belief systems such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism in Korea, they are only a superstructure. Koreans' fundamental religious basis is spirit worship, which includes shamanism and nature worship in general. The belief systems in Buddhism and Confucianism mingled with this spirit worship and formed a hybrid (or syncretistic) Buddhism. Korean society is a multireligious country that has never had a single religion; it has always been a pluralistic, syncretic society.

Eunbo Shin, a Korean scholar of religion, analyzes how Korean's traditional religiosity affects the view of life and death. She points out that not only Korean indigenous beliefs and shamanism but also other (imported) religions have affected the formation of Koreans' view of life and death.

> Unlike the West, where Christianity had a great influence, Korea's traditional death culture was handed down with a unique structure of shamanism based on the form of 'indigenous belief'. The structure of potential beliefs that are deeply rooted in our consciousness has changed to a multi-layered view of life-death while accommodating foreign religions.[17]

Questions about life and death is a unique domain of religion that neither the societal nor the political domain can answer. The realm of religion deals with the mysterious and transcendent concepts that border life and death. The same is true of our recognition of God because dealing with the perception of God is entirely the domain of religious philosophy. It can be said that when the perception of God of foreign religions

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[16] Homer B. Hulbert, *The Passing of Korea* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1906), 404, http://link.library.utoronto.ca/eir/EIRdetail.cfm?Resources__ID=507490&T=F.

[17] Eunbo Shin, "Hanguginui jonggyoseongi sasaenggwane michineun yeonghyang" 한국인의 종교성이 사생관에 미치는 영향 [Analyzing the effect of religiosity on the view of life and death in Korea], *Studies in Religion* 78 (2018): 77, https://doi.org/10.21457/kars.2018.78.3.12.75.

was transmitted to Korea, it developed into a unique structure based on the original Korean perceptions of deities. As with the understanding of life and death, the Korean perception of God has also formed over a long period of time in layers based on Korean traditional shamanism and syncretization with other religions.

According to shamanism scholar Eunhee Shin, the spirits of Korean shamanism can be broadly divided into three types.[18] First, the natural spirits, such as the heavenly gods, the earthly gods, the mountain gods, and the water gods, are representative gods. Second are the human spirits, which are further divided into two types. The first is the living spirit, which is a living spirit (生靈) that resides in the bodies of humans and other living things, and the second is the dead spirit (死靈), a spirit that is separated from the body of humans and living things through the process of death.

The third type is the rest of the gods that are difficult to distinguish as natural or human spirits. Examples of these gods are Geollipsin (lower gods, interpreted as messengers in charge of errands from higher gods) and Cheuksin (gods that stay in a specific area of the house). There are many gods in this category.

Other gods are important, but the most important factor for my project is the first kind of god(s), the natural spirits. In shamanism, spirits permeate all natural phenomena in all living beings: the sky, earth, sea, and mountains. Of these, the most representative god is the god of heaven. Eunhee Shin indicates that the god of heaven represents the totality of all gods with the concept of monistic-multiplicity. In other words, the existence

[18] Eunhee Shin, "Mugyowa gidokgyoui yeonggaenyeomui bigyo jonggyo cheolhakjeok daehwa" 무교와 기독교의 영(靈)개념의 비교 종교 철학적 대화 [Comparative dialogue of the shamanic concept of spirits and the Christian Holy Spirit], *Korean Shamanism* 9 (2005): 82.

of the diversified spirits is connected to one another and forms solidarity in an organic way. Shin explains it this way: "The philosophical structure that allows the various spirits to harmonize and experience healing and liberation in the ritual of non-religion is not an outflow from a single spirit, but a qualitative event made in the solidarity of various polytheistic spirits."[19] She points out that the most important god in shamanism, the natural spirit (god), has an organic connection with the others and that the gods can be represented by the superior deity as the light going through a lens focuses in the center. Monistic-multiplicity can be interpreted in this way. The god(s) in shamanism have many different features and characters. It is hard to imagine that shamanism is monotheism. It can be categorized as a form of "hetero" theism but in organic relationship. As Shin noted, in the shamanistic view, the gods permeate natural phenomena in all things. The deities in shamanism manifest in the world. In this sense, gods are in the world. This fulfills the partial standard of panentheism.

In shamanism, spirits or supreme deities have interactions with the world or worldly things and influence them. This belief meets a criterion of panentheism. The deities are in the world but are not equal to the world. However, the deities have the power to influence worldly things. It is believed in shamanism that the divine transcendent power intervenes in world events. This means that shamanism's deities are transcendent and at the same time immanent. Thus, shamanism can be categorized as implicit, personal/nonpersonal, relational, natural, and modern panentheism in Cooper's category.

[19] Shin, "Mugyowa gidokgyoui yeonggaenyeomui bigyo jonggyo cheolhakjeok daehwa," 105.

Donghak is a unique religion in Korea, founded by Jaewoo Choi in 1860 at the end of the Joseon Dynasty. Donghak is characterized by a synthesis of three religions: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. However, the idea of unifying three major religions was an element of the Korean indigenous religion, which was not only a religion but also the fundamental basis of Korean metaphysics. Therefore, studying Donghak is beneficial for understanding Korean metaphysics and finding panentheistic elements. The founder of Donghak, Choi argued that the established religions, Buddhism and Confucianism, were at the end of their life span and were on the verge of decline. Choi also criticized Confucian ideas and said that anyone who entered Donghak could become a nobleman, which is the highest and ideal status of the human being in Confucianism. The center of Donghak's ideology is the belief in Sicheonju (侍天主). Donghak emphasizes reverence for God of heaven, and in Donghak, each person must realize that God of heaven is enshrined in their body. This doctrine later developed into an idea that saw God of heaven as inherent not only in humans but also in all natural beings. A well-known expression in Donghak thought is Innaecheon (人乃天). This conveys the idea of "equality for all people," which contains the idea that human beings are the heaven and reveal the transcendent God of heaven that resides intrinsically in all beings. As we saw earlier, the god that was highest in the hierarchy among gods in the realm of shamanism was God of heaven.

Donghak also developed its own unique ideology based on the shamanist view of gods. This is because Donghak integrates Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Korean indigenous religion (shamanism). Huh states it this way: "It is important to know of the

immanent and transcendent ground of all existence."[20] In the worldview of Korean indigenous religion, human live with heaven (a transcendent being) within themselves (immanence). From this point of view, eating rice is not just for nutrition but is a religious act of eating God because God is in it. Referring to God's immanence and transcendence in one sentence might be accepted as paradoxical. Eastern and Western thought do not agree with each other on this point. Heo noted that this view can be interpreted a little differently in Korean religious thought. "The epistemology of Donghak is—simply put, it is called Buryeongiyeon (不然其然). Literally translated, it means either it is not and it is." Although this may seem like a logical contradiction from the point of view of Western philosophy, it can be concluded that immanence and transcendence are one in Donghak's idea that all processes of perception depend on discernment of the mind. This is fundamentally different from the dichotomous view of Plato. Donghak presupposes a transcendent God who is present in the world (immanent).

Spencer J. Palmer notes the powerful influence of shamanism not only on the religious traditions of Korean but also on the overall life of the Korean people: "[S]hamanism has traditionally retained the most powerful religious influence upon the population as a whole. Shamanism absorbed from Confucianism and Buddhism nearly everything of a supernatural character possessed by them."[21] For example, some Korean Christians do not resist watching an exorcism ceremony conducted by a Korean shaman

[20] Hoon Heo, "Yeongwonui cheolhage daehan ken wilbeoui bipan: hangukjonggyosasangeseoui daeaneul mosaekhamyeo" 영원의 철학 (Perennial Philosophy) 에 대한 켄 윌버의 비판 : 한국종교사상에서의 대안을 모색하며 [Ken Wilber's criticism of perennial philosophy: Searching for alternatives in Korean religious thought.], *Oughtopia* 36 (2021): 76, https://doi.org/10.32355/OUGHTOPIA.2021.10.36.2.69.

[21] Palmer, *Korea and Christianity*, 6.

because they watched such ceremonies when they were young. Shamanism is deeply linked to the conscious and unconscious cultural foundation of all Koreans' thinking system.

Shamanism is mainly focused on temporality and materiality. The primary goal of shamanistic practices is to gain temporal and material blessings in one's current life through the help of supernatural powers. This tendency has influenced Korean Christianity greatly. In the contextualization process, Christianity was infused into a culture that was heavily affected by shamanism. Korean Christians believe in God in order to get temporal and material blessings in their own life or for their ancestors, pray to cure their diseases, and contribute offerings with the hope of getting repaid 30 or 60 or 100 times the worth of their offerings. These beliefs and practices in Korean Christianity are not very different from Korean shamanism.

Korean Christianity understands God as an intimate God that is deeply connected to the lives of humans and intervenes in worldly events; this belief comes from shamanism. Since shamanism believes in endless numbers of spirits or deities that are equivalent to the concept of God, we can see shamanism as a form of "hetero" theism. Therefore, shamanism can be categorized as "hetero-pan-en-theism."

Chapter 7

A Synthesis of Northeast Asian Panentheism: Implicit, Personal/Nonpersonal, Relational, Natural, Modern Panentheism

7.1. Mono-Pan-En-Theism in the Northeast Asian View

In chapter 5, I used John W. Cooper's categorical analysis to examine panentheism. This approach offers a methodology for developing a model of Northeast Asian panentheism. In chapter 6, I discussed the three major religious traditions that have significantly influenced Korean culture and concluded that they all represent various kinds of panentheism. In this section, I argue that the analysis of the three major religions of Korea reveals mono-pan-en-theistic trends in the Korean understanding of God. In the following section, I develop a Northeast Asian view of God within the Cooper's category of panentheism and call for the synthesis of an alternative view in God through the lens of organic panentheism.

In doing so, I use four criteria when examining religions. The combination of these four criteria gives us a clear lens for distinguishing and comparing these three major religions in the Korean peninsula. The following are the four categories: hetero/mono, pan/non-pan, en/non, and theism/non-theism. Since these three religions can be understood as sharing the same style of theism, the last criterion of theism/non-theism

does not actually hold significant meaning. Considering the commonalities in the theism of the three religions, they all belong in the category of panentheism.

Even though Buddhism is not usually considered a theistic religion, the contextualized Korean Buddhism, which was greatly influenced by the secularized Buddhism of India and the Chineseized Buddhism of China, and a form of Mahayana Buddhism whose theological goal is different from early Buddhism can be regarded as a theistic religion. In addition, Confucianism, Taoism, and Korean shamanism contain elements that can be categorized as hetero-pan-en-theism. The unique aspects of the Korean version of Buddhism can be explained as a process of contextualization that happened through interactions with other religions in the Korean peninsula and its contextualization in the different cultures of India, China, and Korea. The unique Koreanness in Korean culture formed Korean Buddhism, which is different from the early Buddhism in India. Shamanism, especially, had a great influence on the formation of Korean Buddhism. When Buddhism was introduced to Korea, Buddhism did not take an exclusive stance toward other religions. Instead, it chose to absorb the elements of other religions and actively engage in a process of syncretization. As a result, Korean Buddhism developed a theology that included belief in savior deities and an emphasis on blessings in current life and the afterlife (the prosperity gospel). Through Jongbing's Mingfu-Lun, as discussed earlier, I argue that the Ultimate Reality in Buddhism includes the world but at the same time exceeds the world, which is not different from the idea of panentheism. Therefore, Korean Buddhism can be categorized hetero-pan-en-theism.

Confucianism is often considered a system of thought and behavior that helps a society be ruled by a coherent and higher form of law, which is represented as heaven

(Tian). However, observing Confucianism from a perspective other than monotheistic Western theism reveals theistic elements in the thoughts and practices of Confucianism. The notion of heaven is a higher principle of the universe. The principle of the universe has many names, such as heaven (Tian), Tae-Kuk, li, and change. The highest aim of heaven affects all places and every myriad thing on earth and exceeds the material world, thus reflecting the transcendent aspect of heaven. The higher aim of heaven is both immanent and transcendent at the same time. Indeed, in this sense Confucianism is mono-pan-en-theism.

Korean shamanism developed alongside various forms of Korean folk religions and beliefs that are often considered animism or worshiping certain objects and nature. However, most Korean shamans' beliefs and practices are primarily intended to connect with one spirit among many or with a group of spirits that have certain characters or personalities. These spirits are believed to be in the world (permanently or temporarily) and interacting with worldly things, including people and nature. At the same time, they are believed to have a supernatural energy or power that can be transmitted through mediators—shamans (or *Mudang* in Korean). Shamanism has both immanent and transcendent features in its belief system. Therefore, shamanism is categorized as hetero-pan-en-theism.

A categorical analysis of Northeast Asian religions reveals that they have common ground in terms of panentheism; they are mono-pan-en-theistic. There are some differences among the three major Asian religions, but through the lens of panentheism it is possible to distinguish a coherent set of features. Even though Buddhism and shamanism have various deities in their belief systems, Korean shamanism has a common

view that regards the god of heaven as the supreme god. The supreme god and other gods exist organically and function together. In this view, even though their category is 'hetero,' it also can be understood as 'mono' in its mode of existence and functioning. Likewise, Buddhism developed various deities who bring salvation to the world. They have different names and narratives in Buddhist theology. However, their personalities and characteristics are not the key; rather, the theological role of these deities in the belief system is the key. In the process of secularization and contextualization in India, China, and Korea, the theological role of a savior deity was required. The divine role that brings salvation to the world was needed. In this sense, the Ultimate Reality in Buddhism can be understood as having the divine function of bringing salvation. The commonality in the three major religions in Korean culture can be summarized as mono-pan-en-theism. This shows that Asian religions already had a panentheistic view of Ultimate Reality and that this way of understanding the deity had been widely shared among Koreans for long time.

This analysis leads to the next step in developing a constructive Northeast Asian view of panentheism, so-called organic panentheism, that will be greatly beneficial to Korean Christians and also to Christians in the rest of the world who have been struggling with the substance-based, dualistic understanding of God. Asian philosophy pursues a both/and view instead of an either/or perspective, not only of things but also of God. In Western metaphysics, this is a paradox. It is hardly understandable. However, Eastern philosophy intrinsically accepts this paradox and achieves a higher understanding beyond the limited view of Western metaphysics. Korean Christians have been confused by the differences between Western and Eastern metaphysics, especially in understanding

God. Korean Christians have tried to understand God with a hetero/mono-pan-en-theistic understanding of the deity, an approach that the three major Korean religions share. However, this understanding does not fit well with the classical Western philosophical/theological understanding of God. This gap between Western and Eastern metaphysics has led to a confusion in Korean Christians' understanding of God. The Northeast Asian panentheistic view of God that I am proposing suggests a constructive understanding of God for Korean Christians.

7.2. A Synthesizing Model for Northeast Asian Panentheism

The new model for Northeast Asian panentheism is that it is an implicit, personal/nonpersonal, relational, natural, and modern mono-pan-en-theism, which I refer to as organic panentheism. The term *organic* comes from Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy of organism or organic philosophy. This term is appropriate to use for this synthesis of Northeast Asian panentheism since it is directly connected to the five characteristics of the new model, which can be conceived as a hybrid of East and West panentheism. This theism is not bounded by Plato's dualistic, substance-based thinking, nor by the classical theism of the West, nor by the distorted theism that the Korean church has had for a long time. Organic panentheism focuses on an optimal model that is acceptable to Christians who share the Northeast Asian culture that has been primarily influenced by three religious traditions: Buddhism, Confucianism, and shamanism. These religious traditions have common ground in their core thoughts, which is that they have a panentheistic understanding of deities. Accepting an imported understanding of God, which may include doctrines that contradict what has been widely believed in a particular

culture, is confusing and not easy for people born and raised in a culture that is heavily influenced by a panentheistic view of deities, unlike the imported theism. Missionaries from the West taught classical theism, which was common and was considered superior in their time to a panentheistic understanding of God. When they came to Korea and taught this classical theism to Koreans who had a primarily panentheistic view of deities, a theological gap in the understanding of God among Korean Christians developed due to these theological and philosophical differences.

This gap has not been examined properly in church history in Korea. I assume that many Korean Christians do not even recognize this difference between Korean Christian theism and classical theism. Specifically, in understanding the important doctrine of the Trinity in Christian theology, this gap leads to confusion because most of the explanations of the doctrine of the Trinity use a framework and language that comes from dualism and substance-based philosophy. The metaphysical gap in theism has caused unnecessary misunderstanding and confusion in Korean Christians' faith.

Some opportunistic religious leaders have made use of this as their chance to lure members of mainline churches to their own churches, and many have been successful. I do not claim that all problems related to heretical leaders of Korean churches have been caused by this confusion related to theism. However, there is a strong correlation between the metaphysical confusion over theism in the Korean church and the emergence of heretical movements. Some of these heretical leaders used modalistic monarchianism as their main theological explanation of theism and the Trinity. Then, they developed their own reasoning and claimed either that they were the only truthful mediators who could deliver God's will to the world or that they were one of the incarnations of God, or that

they were the Messiah of the second coming described in the book of Revelation. If Korean Christians had been given a theistic model that fit better with their metaphysics derived from the unique Korean culture, it would have been possible to prevent much of this unnecessary misunderstanding and its aftermath.

This theological confusion still affects many Korean Christians' understanding of God. The concept of organic panentheism is intended to present a model for understanding God in a panentheistic way based on five characteristics of God: implicit, personal/nonpersonal, relational, natural, and modern. This model is a synthesis of Cooper's categorical analysis of panentheism, my analysis of the three major religious traditions in Northeast Asia, and Whitehead's philosophy of organism.

As I mentioned earlier, Whitehead's philosophy of organism is an appropriate method to use in shaping a new theistic model because he built a philosophical system that evolved from the philosophy of the West based on Plato's initiative but his organic philosophy addressed existing problems with Western philosophy and suggested a new way of doing philosophy. Organic philosophy sees all things in process of becoming rather than substances of beings that statically interact through impacts and reactions. Instead, it suggests an event-focused worldview. In this thought, all things are in the process of becoming and all are involved in another entity's becoming; thus, all are interconnected with one another in some sense. All is in a constant dynamic of changing.

The presuppositions of organic philosophy are similar to the worldview of the Eastern world, specifically the Northeast Asian worldview. For example, Buddhism suggests that all things are interconnected and are in a circular relationship. Confucianism also suggests that the universe is constantly changing and moving forward toward

harmony. Shamanism believes that transcendent spirits dwell in a temporary nature or appear in natural phenomena that are constantly changing but are repeating monthly and yearly according to the changes in nature. The model of God that organic panentheism suggests is a reinterpreted notion of the Christian God through the lens of the Northeast Asian worldview. I will describe the key features of organic panentheism and its five categories through this lens.

Implicit panentheism: The three major religious traditions in Korea are not openly considered panentheistic by other panentheistic religions, nor they claim that they are panentheistic. Except for some philosophers and progressive theologians, not many people or denominations openly claim to be explicitly panentheistic. I hope that organic panentheism will be a pioneer in Christianity in Korea by explicitly claiming the panentheistic idea. However, as already stated, most Korean churches still maintain a conservative theology whose theological stance, surprisingly, is not very different from that of the missionaries who came to Korea about one hundred years ago. Theoretically, organic panentheism should be an explicit panentheism, but in order to win over conservative Korean Christians it would be better to remain an implicit position. Moreover, since all three major religious traditions in Korea are categorized as implicit panentheism, it is more natural for organic panentheism to resonate with this stance.

Personal/nonpersonal panentheism: Shamanism has many spirits and gods who have their own distinct characteristics and tastes. Don Baker notes that in Korean spirituality, Korean folk religion has 273 different names for gods and spirits, "and that does not include ancestors who appear in shamanic rituals."[1] Not only the deities in

[1] Baker, *Korean Spirituality*, 99.

shamanism but also human ancestors who actually once lived on earth are depicted as having personhood. In contrast, in Confucianism the higher way, or heaven, which is regarded as a kind of deity, is understood as the higher principle of the universe that makes all things, including humans and society, more harmonious and benevolent so that goodness prevails in the world instead of conflict and hatred. Korean Confucianism later acquired additional theistic elements from Korean folk religions. Ancestor worship and conceptions of heaven's way have played a central role in Confucianism. In this sense, Confucianism is considered nonpersonal panentheism.

Buddhism, however, has both personal and nonpersonal aspects at the same time. The philosophical practices in Buddhism suggest a way to escape from suffering. This part of Buddhism presents a nonpersonal principle that reveals the secret of life and of the universe. But at the same time, Korean Buddhism which was greatly influenced by Korean folk religions, has many deities such as Buddhas, bodhisattvas, four gods imported from Hinduism, Amitabha, Shakyamuni, etc. Each deity in Buddhism has their own specialty, such as helping people become enlightened, healing the sick, being compassionate to those who pray, etc. They are depicted as theistic beings who have their own personalities. This is personal/and also nonpersonal.

Organic panentheism has both/and aspects of this category. God in organic panentheism provides nonpersonal features and functions as a consequent nature receiving all in God (Confucianism, Buddhism), and the primordial nature of God interacts with actual entities by luring them to their best potentialities (Buddhism, shamanism, Christianity).

Relational panentheism: In all three of the Northeast Asian religions, deities are understood as relational. Sometimes God in Christianity is described as a creator who is away from the creatures and does not intervene in worldly events. Unlike the deistic model, Northeast Asian religions have fundamentally relational deities or an ultimate ground of being as a universal principle. God in organic panentheism is relational within the web of networks of beings. God and the world are in relationship in a symbiotic community. They share an ontological purpose. This organic relation between God and the world fits well with the Northeast Asian understanding and with the biblical understanding of God in Christianity as well.

Natural panentheism: Voluntary panentheism suggests an understanding of God as self-sufficient; God voluntarily created the world merely to express God's creativity. On the other hand, natural panentheism suggests a model in which the existence of the world is essential to God. Northeast Asian religions share a natural panentheistic view. Shamanism's deities were originally deeply connected with nature and natural objects since animism is the prototype of shamanism. Buddhism basically has both aspects. Theravada Buddhism suggests that enlightenment and ending samsara (suffering) are the highest goals in life and that enlightened (theistic beings) recognize that the world is a fabrication. However, the fundamental teachings in Buddhism suppose the interconnectedness of all things, and Mahayana Buddhism suggests a different model for the enlightened in which they follow the higher purpose of an ultimate goal in life that suggests that others' existence and their well-being are deeply linked with the deities.

Confucianism suggests the harmonious coexistence of all; the theistic being, heaven, is expected to be in balance with the earth. The dynamic relation of yin and yang

(*li* and *ki* in neo-Confucianism) is present everywhere. In this sense, all are connected. The concept of God in organic panentheism embraces all features of Northeast Asian religions. Similar to process theism, God's experience of the world is enhanced by the transmitted experience of all actual entities. God and the world are deeply interconnected and coexist. The world needs God and God needs the world. However, God exceeds the world.

Modern panentheism: In classical theism, God is depicted as an unchangeable and immutable absolute being. However, modern theism suggests that God is related to the world, which is constantly changing; therefore. God is also changing. In process theology, God is understood as an actual entity, which implies that God is also in a process of becoming. God prehends the experience of actual entities and receives them into God's consequent nature. Newness and novelty enhance the quality of God's experience of the world. In this sense, God's nature is continually expanding. Likewise, Northeast Asian religions share a common image of the deity that is interacting with the world, and as a result, God is also in a process of changing into something.

Part IV

Chapter 8

The Goal of Constructive Work in Organic Panentheism and Christianity in Korea

Paul Knitter, an ordained Catholic priest and a scholar who self-identifies as both Christian and Buddhist, says, "I'm hoping that Buddhism will help them[Christians], as I think it has helped me, to review and retrieve their Christian beliefs and their efforts to understand, affirm, and live the gospel of Jesus."[1] In this chapter, I want to examine what might be a better way of understanding God in Northeast Asian Christianity, which collided with the multireligious context of Asia as it was adopted in Asia. The perspective of organic panentheism offers a better way to understand the concept of God in Northeast Asian cultures. It can also be beneficial to non-Asian theology in the area of expanding its understanding of the notion of God, which is currently defined in a limited Western cultural and metaphysical context.

The theological commonality of Northeast Asian religions works well with the organic panentheistic notion of God. Specifically, when Northeast Asian Christians understand God through their metaphysical viewpoint, some gaps exist due to Eastern and Western cultural differences, especially in relation to metaphysics. As discussed

[1] Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, 7.

above, Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism are based on a nontheistic or less theistic, pan-en-theism, conscious (principle, personal/nonpersonal), relational, natural, and modern panentheism. So, organic panentheism provides a helpful approach to understanding God through the viewpoint of Northeast Asians.

Organic panentheism suggests that Christians who are born and raised in a Northeast Asian culture have an understanding of God that is different from classical theism in Western theology but is more appropriate for their context. Based on my analysis, organic panentheism reflects the notion of deity/deities in Northeast Asian religions in its understanding of God. Organic panentheism will help Northeast Asian Christians understand God with more suitable images and language than the classical theism from the West. Constructing the model of organic panentheism is a process of developing a contextual theology that is rooted in Korean culture and experience and thus decolonizing from the dominant explanations of God in Western Christianity.

Korean churches currently have a specific and stereotyped understanding of God based on the foundation of the extreme dualisms of body and mind, the physical world and the spiritual realm, the world and God, and the finite and infinity. This dualistic understanding of God has influenced Korean churches and Korean Christians to have a narrow view of God and a somewhat limited understanding of God's relation to the world. This limited understanding of God has created an unnecessary misunderstanding of the doctrines and critical message of the church in Korea. Organic panentheism offers a better way to conceive of God through a contextualized approach that generates a healthier understanding of God.

The implicit aspect of organic panentheism helps people understand God in the Korean context. Since all three major religions in Korea are implicitly panentheistic, Koreans use a panentheistic frame for understanding God. No one claims that they are using a panentheistic framework for understanding God, even though they picture God in this way. The personal/nonpersonal characteristics of organic panentheism will help the Korean church avoid misconceptualizing God as human. Anthropomorphism is a common conceptual misrepresentation that is present in many religions. If we conceive of God in the organic panentheistic way of duality in terms of personal and nonpersonal, this reduces the possibility that God will be understood in an anthropomorphic way. Relational organic panentheism provides a better understanding of God in which God and the world are intimately related. This understanding prevents the adoption of modalism. As God has plentiful relationships among the three persons in God in the Trinity, these abundant relations overflow to the world. Naturally, God shares a rich relationship with the world. In this perichoretic model, there is no room for modalism, which is a problematic explanation of God and is a common view of God in the Korean church.

Natural organic panentheism suggests that God needs the world as much as the world needs God. This view eliminates the deistic view, which indicates that the creator God stays away from the created. This perspective does not fit with stories that we find in the Bible, but some people still have a deistic understanding of God. Modern organic panentheism provides a better understanding of God in which God is in the world and is affected by worldly events, indicating that God interacts with the world and with humans. God is also in a process of becoming and thus changes over time. Overall, organic panentheism offers a theism that makes more sense for Christian faith and biblical

interpretation. Moreover, its panentheistic view fits well with the Northeast Asian religions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and shamanism.

Chapter 9

Organic Panentheism in the Northeast Asian Worldview

9.1. Organic Panentheism Is Contextual

One's understanding of God is limited to a particular time and space. The notion of God needs to be interpreted through theological metaphysics, which gives insights and revelations of God that direct us toward a path of holistic liberation that is not bounded by a certain context. In other words, I wish to find a theology that has emerged from concreteness but at the same time exceeds its boundaries to gain a universal meaning. The possibility of transcendence and of a universal theological interpretation must begin with the concrete foundation that is called reality or the locus of theology. This requires our experience. But the transcending elements in theology appear when the interpretations overcome the contexts.

Every theology has some transcendent and immanent elements, especially regarding the God-world relation. Postmodernism eliminates universality from its way of thinking. It deconstructs modernism, which claims a universal truth. The world we are experiencing consists of both eternal and temporal elements; it is a mixture of eternality and temporality. When both are working together in harmony, our life is sustained without experiencing separation. However, it is still meaningful if we can develop a system that is not bounded by either one of these but transcends both in its dynamics.

This is not a matter of either A or B but of both in harmony. Therefore, our interpretations in theology should embrace both of these opposite elements and bring them to another level of understanding. This requires a flexible system of thinking, one that is more organic and holistic than our current system. Our theological interpretations should transcend reality and gain universality in a complex harmony. Northeast Asian religious traditions help Korean Christians understand God in their cultural context by suggesting a model for a new understanding of God's transcendence and immanence based on their own cultural and religious contexts. The imported Christian theology based on the Western trajectory of thoughts could not provide a contextual understanding of God to Korean Christians because of the gap between the thinking systems of the East and West and many possible variations in between. Organic panentheism provides a useful panentheistic model of the understanding of God that will be beneficial not only to Korean Christians but also to all Christians who have been struggling with the understanding of God suggested by Western philosophy and theology. Organic panentheism offers the possibility of reconstructing the understanding of God so it is not contextual and is not based on the concreteness of reality.

9.2. Organic Panentheism Is Related to Process Thought

Organic panentheism is contextual, which gives it a concrete foundation from which the relation of God-world understanding emerges. However, if organic panentheism is limited only to the context of a certain culture, place, or time, it will fail to gain the universality that allows it to be meaningful in other contexts. I hope that organic panentheism will be a helpful concept not only for Northeast Asian Christians but for

Christians in general. Organic panentheism transcends the limited understanding possible within a certain context. Being limited to a certain context leads to collections of particularities that are often interpreted inconsistently or without the possibility of becoming a systemic structure. The generality that is imposed on God is necessary to hold all the concepts. Adopting instead a metaphysical system that can interpret God and God's actions in various historical contexts produces a consistent and systematic understanding of God. As a result, we can expect God to work in our historical contexts in certain ways. Process thought suggests a concept of God that is based on relationality, persuasiveness, noncoercion, the nonstatic nature of God, and becoming in process. These understandings explain why and how God works in the world. They do not lead to a static, dogmatic, and dualistic understanding of God, especially in terms of God's relation with the world. They suggest an organic way to see and understand God in the world. God is in the world, and the world is in God. This organic and panentheistic understanding of God redirects us away from the static image of God we are accustomed to in classical theism, a God who is confined within the dogmas of impassibility and immutability.

The understanding of God in classical theism is not clear, particularly in its view of how God interacts with the world. In classical theism, God experiences the pain and suffering of the creatures through a person in the Trinity, the Son. In the mysterious union in the relationship of the Trinity, God engages with the broken world indirectly. In this understanding, the creator God is ontologically detached from the world and its pain. Thus, loses the inevitable connection that leads God to engage with worldly events is lost. In contrast, the image of the panentheistic God in process theology fits better with the

understanding of God that Christians usually have than with the classical image of God because the panentheistic God is expected to work in the world as a source of initial aims toward all actual occasions in the actual world. However, if churches want to hold on to classical theism, it will not be easy to reconcile that understanding with the theologies, biblical narratives, and experiences in the world.

The theory of the impassibility of God is deeply linked to the theory of the immutability of God since both philosophical ideas were derived from Greek philosophy's concept of perfectionism. In Greek philosophy God is the one that satisfies the concept of perfection. God should be the most superior being that does not depend on anything, so God should be a self-sufficient, closed being that is not affected by anything outside itself. Therefore, classical theism developed its concept of God as independent, not being affected by anything, impassible, and immutable. God was confined in a very small box of philosophical understanding. However, there has been no good explanation of how and why God, who is described with these characteristics, works in the world. Process thought can liberate the concept of the confined God in classical theism and open the door for theologians and pastors to explain the relationship between God and the world which makes more sense. The Christian narratives, whether in the Bible or in church history, should be interpreted with a theological metaphysics that makes more sense with the concept of God in process thought. Organic panentheism follows the panentheistic understanding of God in process thought. Thus, organic panentheism provides a better interpretation because it connects our theological understanding with our experience of God and the world.

9.3. Organic Panentheism Liberates Our Understanding of God

The organic panentheism model liberates theology from dualism. Studies in postcolonialism show that there are complexities between groups, which is called hybridity. Postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha's central idea is *hybridization*, which describes the emergence of new cultural forms from multiculturalism. Bhabha defines his concept of hybridity as follows: "Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the 'pure' and original identity of authority)."[1] Bhabha sees colonialism as a force that continues to influence the present and the future, not as an overturned event of the historical past. This colonial influence is expressed by the word *coloniality* in postcolonial studies. Bhabha's research is conducted from the perspective of poststructuralism in the study of how history, culture, and politics in the colonial era have been continually influencing the present. His research, focusing on the cultural differences experienced by the colonized, is expressed in his characteristic idea of hybridity. Hybridity is based on cultural differences.

Bhabha explains his research subject as "a difference that is almost the same, but not quite."[2] The demand from the colonizers to the victimized is ambivalent because the perpetrators ask the victimized to resemble them for their own convenience; however, the resemblance must not be exact. It is an ambivalent demand in that they should be similar but not identical. If they become too similar without any difference, the boundary

[1] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 159.

[2] Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis* 28 (1984): 126, https://doi.org/10.2307/778467.

between the perpetrators and the victimized can disappear and the controlling dominance can be challenged; thus, prohibiting the exact same representation is necessary. Hybridity through mimicry has a similar appearance to the actual prototype, but there is always a difference from the original model because it cannot be allowed to be the same. Bhabha argues that the cracked space of this difference brings up the possibility of subversion of the colonial discourse.

According to Bhabha's theory, the victims of colonization are in a condition that allows them to interact with the perpetrators, especially in terms of culture. Therefore, once such interactions have happened among multiple different cultures, it is impossible to recover or restore the essence of the original cultures since it has already been hybridized with others. Bhabha's approach raised questions among postcolonial scholars about what the essence of the so-called originality in culture is. Is it even possible to define the pure culture in its original stage when it has not yet been affected by other cultures? It is impossible to imagine a group of people or civilization that has never had interactions with others. Bhabha points out that all cultures are in hybridization with others. There is no pure concept of originality, according to his theory. In this sense, classical liberation theology's relatively clear separation between the perpetrators and the victimized should be blurred.

Bhabha also developed the concept of ambivalence in postcolonial studies. He claims that a culture consists of opposing perceptions and dimensions. Even though the distinction between two different cultures was once clearer, as the relationship between the cultures develops, in good and/or bad ways, the opposite elements become parts of both cultures. The cultures accept cultural elements from the other culture in their process

of becoming hybridized. Therefore, the boundary of originality in culture becomes more and more unclear. The poststructural way of seeing postcolonial studies illuminates the potential path that Christian theology should take in the future. When the dualistic boundary is blurred, Bhabha's crack of difference brings up new possibilities. Classical theology's dualism should be overcome through a new way of doing theology.

Bhabha's theory in postcolonial studies, specifically the concepts of hybridity, ambivalence, mimicry, and originality, illuminates the problem of classical theism based on dualism and suggests a better model of the God-world understanding alongside process thought. Process thought has similar ways of explaining these relationships in the process of becoming. An actual entity is accepting the past and other elements from the past as data into its own concrescence. Once an actual entity fulfills its concrescence, it perishes and becomes datum (data) for another actual entities' concrescence. Therefore, the web of relationalities of actual entities teaches us that all actual entities are related internally and externally. Not all relationalities work in the same way in the process of becoming of an actual entity. Some are more relevant than others. The intensity of the relevance defines how much the actual entities affect others. Relationality works in various ways by actual entities' relevance to others in the process of becoming. The bottom line is that all actual entities exist in the web of relationality in the big picture. Therefore, even though the degree of intensity might be different, all are related in their becoming. In this sense, the concept of hybridity is explained well in process metaphysics. This is helpful in overcoming the philosophically weak concept of dualism. It expands our way of seeing things from the perspective of a static being or status to

relational flows of relationality. All exist in the web of relationality. Hybridity is essential in defining the identity of a being or becoming.

At the same time, once the context changes, everything becomes blurred again, especially when dualism plays an important role as a tool for analyzing reality. For example, Minjung theology withered after the military dictatorship in South Korea stepped down in the 1980s and the government transitioned to a democracy. The context in which Minjung theology emerged had changed drastically, and the clear picture that defined the good and the bad had changed. The old structure that was once very clear no longer worked well in the new era. Minjung theology has not progressed well in this changed context because the dualistic picture of two groups no longer is central in the new context.

At the same time, the transition in metaphysics in theology has not happened appropriately based on the new contexts. It has not carried its vitality as the history of South Korea moves toward a new phase. This is not only a matter of Minjung theology; it also relates to liberation theology in various cultures and contexts worldwide. Liberation theology should have transformed itself from the dualistic narrative in analyzing contexts to a new way of translating the meaning of a liberation that overcomes the dualism in God and the world. Organic panentheism explains that God exists in duality but not in dualism. The dipolar God exists in the dynamic of two distinctively different natures, consequent nature and the primordial nature of God. This relationality is not limited to the Godself but has expanded to the whole world in God's natures, even to the atomic level. God is in relationality in the process of each actual entity's becoming. Not only God but also actual entities are in the process of becoming in contrast and harmony. The

intensity of the contrast is very important in the process of becoming in organic panentheism since the contrast increases the possibility of achieving a higher experience in actual entities' becoming. God and the world exist in hybridity in organic panentheism as it is true in process thought. Dualism has no dominion over organic panentheism in this perspective.

The liberation of classical theism from dualism is very important to revitalize the withered theology that identified itself in a certain context and to transform theology so it can explain the world that is already in hybridity and ambivalence. A new metaphysical system can redefine what liberation means in new contexts. True liberation in organic panentheistic theology means release from the dualistic God concept that classical theism developed on the basis of Greek philosophy. At the same time, it also means release from the limitation of the understanding of God in liberation theology based on the classical theism that depicts God as a victor or liberator. The liberator narrative of God is bounded by the context and its interpretation, which is specifically based on the classical theistic understanding tied to dualism. The God images in classical theism are not well suited to explaining the complexities of the relationships in the world and the various contexts that are the locus of theology. Also, classical theism portrays God as the absolute ruler of the universe, omnipotent and omniscient, rather than the God of relationality whose love is persuasive, creative, and responsive. The true liberation in organic panentheism leads us to embrace the character of God in hybridity in Godself and in God's relation to the world. The hybridity in God and the world is a clear reason why God should be understood in relationality, not only in Godself but also in the God-world relationship.

God is found in the world, and the world is revealed in God's vision for the best potentialities of each actuality and is fulfilled in the world. The limitation of the dualistic narrative in classical theism fades out in this picture, and instead the hybridity of people in cultures becomes important. People live in a mixture of complexities in the world. The classical theistic dualism cannot lead to a path that is relevant to people who do not define their life in dualistic terms. The understanding of God in organic panentheism suggests that God's nature is not homogeneous but is in a dynamic of God's two natures (or God's dipolarity, in Hartshorne's thought). The hybridity in God's nature requires the liberation of the concept of God held in classical theism. This brings us to a new level of understanding the relationship between God and the world. Especially to Korean Christians this view suggests that Koreans' understanding of God has always been in hybrid among Northeast Asian religions and Christianity. According to Bhabha, in between cultures people experience mimicry, which resembles the colonizers. In this case, it would be accepting the concept of God that the missionaries who came to Korea taught from their Western perspective. Since the Christian concept of God is an imported concept and has been implanted on Korean culture, hybridization has taken place in the process of the acceptance of this new religion. It is of no use to try to discover the original understanding of God in either in the Western or the Eastern tradition. The understanding of God that is in use here and now is hybrid. The mission of organic panentheism is to liberate the limited understanding of God in dualism and redefine the concept of God as a hybrid between the East and the West.

9.4. Organic Panentheism and Ecology

Organic panentheism requires Christian theology to expand its boundaries toward the area of ecology. The realm of organic panentheism is not limited to human history, specifically to political systems. Justice is not limited to the human system. In fact, human civilizations have harmed nature, and some of the damage cannot be reversed. John B. Cobb described destructive societies as a speeding train without brakes. Climate change, various forms of contaminations, and the extinction of many species are examples of the injustices that human civilizations have inflicted on numerous societies of the natural world. These phenomena must be changed. The change requires transforming all Christian theology into an ecological theology or an ecology-based theology. The new Christian theology that organic panentheism suggests is a theology that embraces ecological theology's concerns, language, and metaphysics, not because it is an important and urgent matter to human civilization but because it is deeply related to the mode of existence of God.

Organic panentheism reminds us to see the world from a different perspective. This form of theism begins with realizing that all actual entities are related. They are all interconnected. All actualizations in the universe are connected to one another at some level. In this perspective, human civilizations cannot flourish if they ignore others and have a unilateral, exploitative relationship with others. In this context, others include not only other human civilizations but also all actual entities of the universe. Everything from natural resources to a broadened organic concept of Gaia can be recognized as an actual entity. God is in all actual entities' process of becoming, and all actual entities go into

God's receptive nature after they finish their concrescence. They become a part of God's nature and offer themselves as data for other actual entities' concrescence.

This understanding means that humans are entities who share their lives with others at a certain level. Our existence on earth as human beings owes much to other actual entities. The interconnectivity of all actual entities directs us to neither exploit nor do harm to others for our own good because the negative consequences will come back sooner or later and impact our lives negatively. Climate change and various forms of pollution are distinct examples of this. The earth has been oppressed by humanity's selfish desire to get more by destroying nature beyond the limits of self-regeneration. The destruction that humans have done on earth is not irreversible, however. The human colonization of nature has caused mass destruction. Life on earth has suffered and will continue to suffer as a consequence. True liberation should incorporate the liberation of nature from the systemic colonialities on earth inflicted by human societies. We need to turn back from the anthropocentrism that classical Christian theology has long taught. Today, we need come back to our senses, leaving behind anthropocentric theology and embracing a relationality-focused organic panentheistic theology.

Conclusion

The organic panentheism that characterizes the Northeast Asian worldview (which is implicit, personal/nonpersonal, relational, natural, and modern) liberates people from a constricting understanding of God and God's relation to the world, especially those who were born in Asian cultures and accepted Christianity as their primary belief. This frees people from the Western dualistic understanding of the relationship between God and the world, mind and body, man and woman, spirit and materials, I and thou, and so on. This understanding opens enormous possibilities for articulating a new relationship between God and the world, one that is mutually reciprocal, distinguishable but not separated, and is found in an unending dynamic relationship as in the symbol of the Ultimate Polarity (*Tae-kuk,* the Korean concept of the unending and dynamic relationship between *yin* and *yang*). It represents a hybridization of differences. The hybridization of differences is specifically meaningful in the understanding of God between the Western and Eastern concept of God. An organic panentheistic understanding of God suggests new possibilities that can overcome the gap in the understanding of God based on the dualism that is expressed in Western philosophy. This opens a new realm for an understanding of God that is not based on dualism, which yields a static and unchangeable concept of God, nor on imperialistic colonialism thought, which has been tied to Western Christianity in non-European countries. Specifically, Christians who were born in cultures that do not share fundamental philosophical understandings with the

Western world experience difficulty understanding the Christian God with the Greco-Roman thinking patterns. The Northeast Asian religious traditions have a significantly different understanding of deity compared to the understanding in Western cultures. The three major religious traditions that have substantially influenced Korean culture—Buddhism (hetero-pan-en-theism), Confucianism (mono-pan-en-theism), and shamanism (hetero-pan-en-theism)—have elements in common that can be understood as a sort of panentheism. Using John W. Cooper's five categories of panentheism, I analyzed these three major religious traditions in Korea and concluded that they can be categorized as implicit, personal/nonpersonal, relational, natural, and modern panentheism. Organic panentheism is based on this analysis and calls for a synthesis model of Northeast Asian panentheism.

Organic panentheism brings these elements from Northeast Asian traditions and utilizes them in the Christian understanding of God. Studies done by Western philosophers and theologians on panentheism, especially by process theologians, imply that panentheism is beneficial to the understanding of God in Christian theology. The panentheistic understanding of God makes more sense when we interpret the Bible, reflect on experiences of God in church history, try to engage in meaningful dialogue between theology and the secular sciences based on human reason, and make meaningful connections with universal human experiences. Theologians who follow a panentheistic understanding of God, including process theologians, know these benefits well and are trying to design a model that closely fits a panentheistic understanding of God. Unfortunately, however, many of these attempts are based on Western contexts and have been done by Western theologians. Organic panentheism is my humble attempt to

overcome these biases in Christian theology. Northeast Asian religious traditions provide us with profound philosophical and theological foundations that we can use to make constructive connections and to bridge the ideological gap between Western and Eastern cultures (and many others in between).

Organic panentheism is a model for a contextual understanding of God that is based in the locus of theology. It does not eliminate any cultural, philosophical, or theological spaces that are the most important elements in understanding God. God is making and at the same time God is being made by context. (The concept of God is not a fixed image; it is in the process of being continually interpreted.) God in organic panentheism is based on process thought, which provides a fresh and reasonable understanding of God and of God–world relations. Process thought especially enables our understanding of God to hold a both/and, nondualistic, panentheistic model, one that sees God as transcendent and immanent at the same time, as Northeast Asian religious traditions imply in their theism. Organic panentheism liberates the concept of God found in classical theism, which is confined by dualism.

Many Christians in Asia, including Koreans, were taught by Western missionaries when they accepted Christian beliefs. Imperialistic colonization was associated with most Christian missions and caused complex layers in the Asian understanding of God. This constrained image of God, caused by human mistakes and philosophical, theological, and cultural differences, needs to be redefined. Organic panentheism opens a door for us to accept and embrace nature as God's manifestation and as a living organism that is a part of God. God makes relationships with and in the world, but at the same time God transcends the world. God provides an initial aim to all things so that they can blossom

into all the potentialities that will be accepted and enjoyed in God's nature. In this sense, human behavior that destroys nature to fulfill human needs can be framed in a different way, a way that is mutually reciprocal and that enhances the harmony of yin and yang. Organic panentheism in the Northeast Asian perspective offers an alternative understanding of the relationship between God and the world that will make better sense to Christians in many cultures around the world. In this sense, organic panentheism is oriented toward eco-theology.

When Christianity is transmitted to a particular culture, it can establish a subordinate relationship with other religions already in the culture. As a Christian theologian and a scholar of comparative religions, when I studied Korean religions, I realized that they have in common a panentheistic understanding of god. I hoped to use this as a tool to liberate the understanding of God in Korean Christianity, which is trapped in the dogma that has been drifting between the ocean of metaphysical limitations in the Western thought tradition and the not-yet-embodied Eastern religious traditions' understanding of god.

However, the fact that I am a Christian theologian makes me hesitate to dive into this. I am afraid that I may have inherited the colonizers' underlying beliefs held subconsciously by white Western missionaries when the gospel was introduced to Korea 130 years ago. However, there is power in the gospel of Christianity, especially in the message of Jesus Christ. That power is the power of liberation. The liberating power that sustains Christianity does not lie in subordinating and colonizing other religions. Nor does it mean that we should unilaterally define other religions as false religions and attempt to free those who faithfully believe in them. It is important to realize that people

may understand the core message of the gospel of loving your enemies better if their belief systems are from other religions. Understanding the Bible through a Western theological lens developed in Greco-Roman thought patterns is different from interpretations through the hermeneutical lenses of Buddhist, Confucianist, or shamanist thinking. Being open and having a decolonizing mindset are important in doing this comparative work. If we lose these important values, our work will repeat the pattern of colonizing other religions and cultures. A panentheistic understanding of God frees our mind from dogma and guides us through a lens that allows us to conceive God better because we can discover the same understanding of God in major religions other than Christianity.

I am suggesting the possibility of a postcolonial Christian theology through this project. Achieving this is very important for the development of Christian theology. The history of Christianity has been dominated by the interpretation of the message of Jesus Christ from the perspective of Greco-Roman thinking patterns. In other words, the Greco-Roman, hybridized Christianity is the main view of Western Christianity. However, as John B. Cobb Jr. said, this has been a tragedy for Christianity. This means that Greco-Roman metaphysics is a problem because it has been the only norm granted authority in Christianity.

A theology based on Greco-Roman metaphysics has limitations, and it deprives people who live in non-Greco-Roman cultures the opportunity to reconstruct theology on their own terms. They have the right to express their cultural diversity and to not have to adopt the methodology of Western theology as the only way. It is problematic if they are made to accept one interpretation as the only norm for doing theology. In this way, the

Jewish understanding of God was tailored to the perspective of the Greco-Roman thinking patterns. The message of Jesus and the narratives of the Bible were made into doctrine according to the Greco-Roman way of interpretation. In the process, we lost something important. The Greco-Roman thinking patterns reinterpreted the Jewish understanding of God and invented a theory of God that was difficult to understand and far from Jewish traditions.

The process of defining organic panentheism is a process of decolonizing the limited Western philosophy and theology based on Greco-Roman metaphysics and identifying a postcolonial Christian theology that can be constructed. Through this process of decolonizing and theorizing a postcolonial Christian theology, we can find an embodying theology that reflects the realistic and concrete experience in a context that is appropriate for some Christian communities that share Northeast Asian culture. I hope that my work will also open a door for Christian communities all over the world that need to decolonize theology and construct a theology that will better fit their contexts.

Organic panentheism brings new possibilities not only to Korean Christians and Christians in Northeast Asia but also to other Christians around the world. Having a clear concept of God is the basis of theology and belief. If that concept is vague or does not fit with other beliefs, then it causes confusion or unhealthy belief. Organic panentheism suggests a model for understanding God that is relevant to our perception of the world and of God and of world relations. I hope that organic panentheism will be beneficial to all Christians in the world.

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